

No One Said the Words All Have to Rhyme by moonflowers

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Summary:

It was kinda like someone had turned his anger dial down to about a twenty, when it was usually stuck somewhere close to a hundred. Like the other day, when they'd somehow ended up sitting together in the almost-dark, talking on the porch of the empty house about how Steve had never learnt to ride a bike. He'd been different then, too. It was weird, and call him a pessimist, but he felt like he was just waiting for Hargrove to suddenly flip out on him again. He always seemed about ready to boil over; crackling and electric, a storm about to break. Steve felt more like water, brackish and still, all stuffed up with mud and silt and not quite sure what was at the bottom.

1. Am I Really Keeping Time or is it Only Keeping Me Instead

Author's Note:

Title and chapter titles from the Trixie Mattel song Soldier. Because apparently country-ass drag queens give me Harringrove feels. So this is the type of thing I know a lot of people have already written, but it's something I haven't really done yet, and the perfect excuse for me to get a bunch of headcanons in.

Notes for the Chapter:

Warning for this chapter - Neil being an abusive twat, slurs and verbal abuse.

Billy was used to quiet mornings. Better to wake early, be up and dressed before everyone else, just in case his dad decided it was an offence to not be that particular morning. He was used to being greeted by a silent house. He was used to quiet breakfasts, to Susan treading on eggshells, to Max straight up sulkily ignoring them all. To his dad watching him stonily over the top of his newspaper and waiting for him to make a wrong move. The calm before a storm. To holding his breath and waiting to see if that storm was going to break or not, if it would be him or his dad who lost patience first. Billy was used to quiet mornings, and he hated them.

That morning in particular, he'd felt off from the moment he'd woken up, tense and jittery and his head sort of thick. He decided to skip breakfast altogether he was so wound up, spared himself the bother of having to put up with any of his supposed family. Instead, he spent the fifteen minutes or so that left him with making sure he looked extra fucking good. He enjoyed primping, so what. It cheered him up too, to be honest, knowing he looked hot as fuck. And if he was able to get some cheap thrills out of the hungry looks people at school gave him, he was sure as hell going to make the most of it. He was about to leave, stomped out of his room to go and holler at Max to get the fuck in the car, but as he rounded the corner he almost

walked right into his dad.

"Maxine, get - !"

"Good morning, son."

"I - " He faltered, jerked back a step, thrown off by his dad's sudden presence right in his face. Stupid. He should have expected it. "Good morning, dad."

"You weren't hungry?"

"What?"

"You can't have been hungry, it's the only reason I can think of why you wouldn't join your family for breakfast." He spoke evenly, patient and quiet. It was worse than yelling.

"Come on dad, I - "

"Obviously it was more important to you to fuss about with your hair like a damn fag instead of sitting down with your family to eat like a nice, normal, respectful boy would."

"I'm sorry sir," he said quickly, knowing the fastest way to weasel his way out of a proper talking to was just to apologise as soon as possible, whether he meant it or not. He never meant it.

"Hmm." His dad just watched him closely for a moment, mouth thin and eyes narrowed, searching for a weak point, a crack that he could tap at with expert precision until Billy shattered. He was good at that. Billy wondered if he was going to get a slap, found himself tensing in anticipation and hating himself for it. But his dad must have been in a good mood, because he stalked off, briefcase in hand, to his car to head to work. Apparently a verbal bashing was enough to satisfy him that morning. He didn't hit Billy all that often, and when he did it was usually nothing more than a good slap, the surprise of it worse than the brief flare of pain and the stinging humiliation that followed. Neil might not have hit him that morning, but his words had been enough to sour Billy's mood all over again.

That sourness must have shown on his face, because when Max

finally scuttled across the yard and into the passenger seat of the Camaro, she was watching him warily. Was still watching him as he backed out of the drive, bumped along over the pot holes on old Cherry Road, and as they drove through town to school. He tried to ignore it, tried to ignore the weight of her attention and the heaviness of the cloudy sky overhead. It was May, why the fuck was the weather still so shitty?

"Billy - "

"What?" he spat before she could say anything else, eyes fixed on the road rather than turning to look at her. He didn't want to see what her face looked like. Whether it was pity, anger or fear, he didn't fucking want to know about it. She didn't answer, didn't break her silence until they were almost there.

"I just wanted to - are you okay?"

Billy's hand clenched on the steering wheel. He should have been expecting her to stick her nose in too. These days, on occasion, they would - shock horror - actually talk to each other about shit. Nothing much, no proper deep sibling mushy crap, she just sort of checked in if Neil had been in a particularly charming mood. He should have known she'd try and feel him out after he'd risked skipping breakfast.

"I'm fucking peachy, Maxine," he said, braking abruptly in the school parking lot, car jolting, "now get the fuck out and mind your own damn business, okay?"

He still didn't want to look at her, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw any concern she might have had for him drop away, face scrunching up with frustration instead. "Fine," she shoved the door open to scramble out. For a moment, he thought that was all the reply he was going to get, but he wasn't so lucky. "Get your head out your ass, I was only asking!" she hollered as she swung the door shut again. It was a testament to how far they'd come since last year that he didn't yell at her for it.

He sat stiffly behind the wheel, seriously considering just skipping school for the day. The shitty mood he was in, it was pretty likely he'd have someone bleeding before the day was out. That was just the

way things worked for him, sometimes. Nothing major had happened that morning, in fact Neil had been positively cheery by his standards, but metaphorical bluebirds could have been singing, and it would have made no damn difference. It was just a Bad Day. He looked up, steeling himself to get out of the car, and his eye caught on Harrington's Beemer parked a little ways in front, could just about see the King himself slumped over the wheel, looking about as eager to get out of his car as Billy was. Billy felt his lip curl in annoyance. What the fuck could Harrington possibly have to feel so shitty about?

#

It was still early when Steve woke up, by most people's standards. But he'd gotten so used to jolting awake at two or three AM and only sleeping fitfully after, that he was feeling pretty good about actually having a morning where the sun was up before he was. And it was bright too, the thin yellow brightness of an actual spring day behind his curtains, a slant of it cutting through a gap where he hadn't drawn them properly, the disjointedness of it somehow making his cluttered bedroom floor look even more of a mess. He was lucky his mom didn't burst in to check the state of it like she used to.

He was more than used to not waking up next to Nancy anymore. Not that they'd ever gotten the chance all that much; not without him having to make a run for it out of her window first thing, or her feeling fidgety after lying to her parents so she could stay over when his were away. She'd never felt right about it, after that first time she'd done it and what had happened to Barbara. He was used to it, but that didn't mean he had to like it. It wasn't that it was Nance he was missing as such, he just... well, he'd never really liked being on his own.

After a decent night's sleep, he was more reluctant to leave his bed than he usually was, but he still felt restless after five minutes or so of trying to doze, so dragged himself up for a shower. Then breakfast, which he ate not because he was hungry, but because he knew he would be in like two hours time when he was stuck in math, and he'd get grumpy about it. So he sat at the kitchen counter, and choked down some cereal. Fucking stupid really; the rest of the day, he had a killer appetite, was basically a human garbage disposal, but first thing in the morning he found it hard to stomach.

His eye kept landing on his parents' luggage, an expensive set all in a rich tan leather, stacked up by the front door ready for them to go. He decided then he'd set off for school as soon as he could, even if it made him crazy early, because they always got snippy with each other just before they went on a trip. Despite how much time they spent away, planes and travel arrangements still made his mom edgy. She'd probably already taken something for it, which would only make his dad's patience with her even shorter. He put his bowl in the sink, and went to say goodbye.

"Mom," he said as he swung slowly into his parents' room, one hand still on the door frame, "I'm going to head off to school, okay?"

"Ah, my darling boy," sure enough, she already seemed a bit too loose, a little slurred despite how put together she looked, reaching out a hand to him from where she was resting on the bed, "come and say goodbye to your mama."

He uncurled his hand from the door frame, walked across the thick carpet to sit next to her on the bed. He took her hand, and she smiled. "Where are you going again?" He remembered, but he wasn't sure she did.

"New York," she said, with a wide, soft smile that made her eyes warmer, "I might see if I can persuade your father to visit your Aunt Val. I haven't seen her in a long time."

"Yeah," Steve said, knew she missed her sister a lot, "that'd be nice. I've uh, I've really got to go to school now," he said. He'd still be far too early.

"If you say so," she let go of his hand, gave it a pat, "you be good while your mama is away."

"I always am, mom." He kissed her cheek.

"Mm," she said, slumped back onto the pillows again. "Make sure you say goodbye to your father."

Shit. "Yeah. Bye mom."

"See you in two weeks, my darling boy."

He stopped for a moment in the doorway of his dad's study, and didn't go in.

The morning had turned a little cloudy by the time he went out to his car. Luckily, he wasn't driving Dustin that morning either - the kids liked to bike in to school together when the weather was okay - so he was free to please himself. The parking lot was still pretty empty when he pulled up, eyes searching for a blue Camaro. Not for any particular reason, he was just in the habit of noticing Hargrove's car, in the same way he'd register Tommy's, or Mrs Byers'. It wasn't there. He let himself slump forward on the wheel, breathe a little, windows down and cool morning air settling around him, chilly enough not to feel completely springlike yet. Eventually, he went in.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is mostly an intro to get me going, bits of it nicked from a drabble I've posted before. There will be PoV switches, but from now on I'll stick to either Billiam or Steve for a whole chapter at a time. I don't know who first wrote Steve's mom as Italian, but I've always liked it, so that's what's happening.

I have about half of this drafted and the whole thing planned out, so hopefully I'll post pretty regular. I mean I'll probably change what happens a time or two before I post it, but.

2. Weirdness Follows Me Wherever I Go

Notes for the Chapter:

Warnings - I guess more slurs/references to Neil being awful.

Billy's day never really picked up again after that morning. Maybe it could have done if he'd let it, but he kept holding on to the tension he'd felt heavy in his belly since he'd woken up, held onto that sourness the run in with his dad had left there. Not that it was unusual; their 'chat' that morning had been relatively tame compared to some. Only, some days, it was harder to shake it off. Classes dragged and he did the minimum he could, safe in the knowledge he could easily make it up later on. School had always come easy to him, one thing about himself he was thankful for. He picked up Max and drove her home after class, because he had no fucking choice. She was still sulky from their snapping at each other that morning, and he wasn't in the mood to make it up with her any more than she was with him. More than anything, he wanted to back out of the driveway and speed off as soon as she was out of the car, go anywhere but into that fucking house. But after making the stupid move of skipping breakfast that morning and his dad getting all pissy about it, Billy knew better than to avoid dinner with them as well. He'd have to sit through it, unpleasant as it would be for everybody involved, and play nice. If he was lucky, he'd be able to sneak out when they were done eating, before he jumped right out of his skin.

He *was* lucky. He left not long after dinner, hopping out of his bedroom window just to be safe. His dad didn't usually care what Billy did outside of the house too much, as long as he did as he was told while he was in it. And didn't attract too much of the wrong kind of attention, of course. For someone who was such an unpleasant bastard behind closed doors, he always seemed awful worried about what the neighbours might think. Memories of the lectures he'd been given about the same subject over and over left a near constant bitter taste at the back of his throat that he couldn't shift, that no amount of booze or smokes could cover up.

'Don't expose yourself for the little faggot we both know you are. You

made that mistake once and I'll be damned if I let you do it again, boy. I'll not have a repeat of last time, you hear me? I'll not have you making an exhibition of yourself like a damn fairy.'

Which Billy had always thought was fucking unfair, every time his father trotted it all out again. Firstly, they hadn't moved because of Billy being a queer. They'd moved because of Max's scumbag dad practically digging through their trash, that's why. Alright, maybe it was a little bit because Billy was queer too. But he'd hardly 'exposed himself for fuck's sake. He'd come home with a bitch of a hickey, and before he could name drop some girl to cover his tracks, Max had helpfully pointed out that he'd told her he was going to meet his friend Antonio. Fucking dumb little shithead. He'd still not forgiven her for that, even though it was his own stupid slip up - he should have told Toni to take it fucking easy on his neck, should have thought ahead and lied to Max too. Not that the knowledge made any of it any easier. And dragging up all of that bullshit to think about all over again hadn't improved his mood any. It was probably for the best he'd gone out of the window instead of the door; if he'd bumped into his dad, he might have been inclined to pick a fight, which would have helped exactly fucking nobody.

As it was, he was hardly having a good time after sneaking out either. He'd ended up walking rather than taking his car, in the hopes of uncoiling some of the crackling tightness all up his arms and legs. It felt as though if he took one good swipe at something, it'd all come loose and he'd be able to breathe again. But he was trying to stop lashing out these days if he could help it, hence the walking. Fucking bullshit, was what it was. There was a house on the edges of the fancy part of town, left to rot for whatever reason, empty and as good as derelict. He hadn't been heading there on purpose, but it seemed as good a place as any to sulk. Some of the kids said a witch lived there, some a killer clown, some that it was a werewolf's lair. Billy personally didn't give a shit, as long as he was alone. It wasn't that he wanted to be alone, more that the only company available to him sucked. His dad? Fuck no. Susan and Maxine? No thanks. Tommy H. or some other dickweed from school? No fucking way. He fucking hated feeling alone, but it was the only option he had, and he was used to it. And no one would bother him there.

He didn't go inside, because as dumb as those ghost stories might have been, the joint was fucking creepy. But he burned off some of that tension that always sat heavy across his shoulders, rolling in like thunderclouds ready to break, by smashing things up in the yard a little bit. He hurled a handful of white pebbles through remaining window panes one by one, relishing the weight of each little stone on his palm, the swing of his shoulder, the burst as the glass shattered. He kicked at the already trampled mail box, hefted a great lump of a stone bird bath onto its side, scraping up his hand, feeling a little of his frustration slip away as it thunked into the overgrown lawn. Ugly piece of shit. Breathing fast, still jittery but not wound quite so tight, he sat on the splintery old porch and smoked.

A noise across the yard made him startle, embarrassingly obvious, and he was halfway to his feet before he saw who it was. Harrington. King Steve Harrington, of all fucking people, had stumbled into Billy's private sulk. Rude. He had that goddamn bat slung over his shoulder, eyes big and vacant, mouth a little slack with inattention, and dark against his pale face in the gloom. For a second, a hot, blue flash of a second, he was mad about being interrupted, felt as though Harrington was intruding on something only for him. But something - sheer desperation probably - gave him pause, made him wonder if Harrington might be better company than none, and the storm fizzled away into nothing again. And then, because he was a bigger dork than he'd ever admit, Billy licked his dry lips, said, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"Shit!" Harrington jumped a foot in the air, swung his bat forward in Billy's direction.

"Easy Harrington," he said, fought down a grin as he took another drag, let the smoke drift away, "only little old me."

"Yeah, you say that like it means I'm safe," Harrington said, mouth pressed grim and tight, but he lowered the bat. He stayed standing, and Billy didn't ask him to sit.

"You didn't answer the question," he said. "What are you doing here?"

Harrington looked like he was about to tell him to fuck off, but instead he sort of slumped, softened, shrugged as if to say *well, why*

not. "I've had a shitty day, and walking around helps me get my head back on straight. Not that it's any of your fucking business. You?"

"Same, I guess." More or less, anyway.

Harrington nodded, and they were silent. Billy watched him, noted the discomfort etched into every line of his body, and realised he'd never apologised. Though it wasn't much of a realisation; he was well aware of it, had never even deliberated over whether he should have apologised or not, because it had never been up for question. He hadn't apologised for it because he didn't do apologies, didn't want to touch anything from that night with a fucking ten foot stick. It had barely even been anything to do with Harrington anyway, he was just in the way and Billy'd been pissed. Angry at his dad, himself, Max, the world, even thinking about it months later made his skin hot and tingly and like it might split open. He mashed the butt of his cigarette hard into the warped planks of the porch floor, felt his control slipping between his fingers.

"Tell me something," he said quickly, prayed he didn't sound desperate.

"What?" Harrington blinked at him, still rolling along the conversation at half-speed, apparently. Idiot.

"Quick, Harrington," he snarled, feeling himself starting to crack apart, "say something, tell me something I don't know."

"I uh," Harrington hesitated, jaw working and brow furrowed as he thought, features blurred and indistinct in the dim light. "I don't know what you -"

"Come the fuck on, Harrington," Billy snapped his fingers at him to hurry, desperate for a distraction.

"Fine, fuck okay," he swept his hair back out of his eyes, a nervous tic if Billy'd ever seen one. "I uh, I never learned how to ride a bike."

"...What?"

"You heard me," Harrington said, more to the straggly grass under his feet than to Billy.

"Yeah I did, just..." It hadn't been what he was expecting. He felt slightly hysterical laughter creep up his throat as the crackling coils of anger loosened just a touch. He felt so relieved by it that he found himself thinking fuck it, and saying, "me neither."

"What?"

"You heard me," Billy echoed, and Harrington snorted. "I can rollerblade, and I can ride a horse okay. But I never learnt how to ride a bike." His dad had never bothered to try and teach him, more like. Billy'd be kicking himself for revealing such mundane shit about himself later on, but at that moment he felt too giddy to care as the day's tension, anger, ebbed away, clouds lifted.

"Wait, what?" Harrington scrambled to sit on the porch steps with him, less than a foot away, looked up at Billy as though he was from another dimension. "You can ride a *horse*?"

"Yes dipshit, that's what I said. You deaf as well as dumb?" Harrington continued to gape at him like an idiot and, annoyed by the silence, Billy kept talking. "Haven't done it for years though." His mom's parents had had a beautiful house, small but perfect, and happy, and a barn full of sunshine and horses and hay dust. His mom's dad had taught him, and he'd loved it, was good at it, until his dad forbade them from making the trip up to visit them anymore. One more tiny speck of something good that Neil had gone out of his way to put a stop to. He hadn't been all that thrilled about the rollerblading either, which Billy had gotten a kick out of. He twisted his fingers around the stem of a weedy, yellow flower coming up between the porch slats, tugged it until it came loose.

"Well shit," Harrington slumped back against the railings. There was an ominous sounding creak before the rotten wood gave way completely, and he fell backwards into a weed-choked flowerbed. Billy just about lost his shit laughing over the sight of him, long legs sprawled out and eyes big with shock. It was proper big, loud, laughter too, the type that made his belly ache and his eyes water. And Harrington just blinked up at him, dazed, and looking like he wasn't sure whether to laugh too or be offended. Before he could get a hold of himself and give what he was doing a second thought, Billy stood and reached over to help him up.

Harrington took his hand, and Billy pulled him to his feet. There was an awkward quiet moment, where both of them felt like the ground beneath them had shifted to something unfamiliar, and Billy felt like he'd somehow misstepped, tripped off the path. He started to panic, started to feel all crackly again, too big for his skin. "You've gotta go."

"What?" Harrington started, face all scrunched up in confusion. "I don't - "

Billy waved him away. "Just fuck off, Harrington."

He rolled his eyes, sighed like Billy's mere existence was all some big inconvenience to him, and did what Billy asked. "Asshole."

Once Harrington had turned the corner, ducked under the hedge and back onto the street out of sight, Billy felt oddly relaxed. It hadn't been awful. It was the first real conversation he'd had with someone in a long while that he didn't feel like he'd fucked up. Harrington's company hadn't rubbed him the wrong way, hadn't been invasive like he would have expected it to be, like his dad's was, and significantly less irritating than anyone else from school's. He hadn't felt the pressure to perform like he usually did. It was nice.

Notes for the Chapter:

I just want Billy on a horse okay let me live.

3. Go Back to Bed

Notes for the Chapter:

Mentions of underage BJs

Steve was too tired to deal with Billy Hargrove. Not exhausted, not the draining, achy tiredness that came after a bad night's sleep, so... that was something. It wasn't like he slept badly all the time even, he'd just have a particularly shitty string of nights sometimes, and it always hit him hard, left him seeing things in the shadows until the sun came up, and falling asleep in Chem. No, it wasn't that, had been sleeping pretty good the last couple of weeks. He'd just been taking a nap when Dustin's mom had called last minute to ask if he could pick Dustin up from the arcade. He'd fallen asleep right after dinner, sprawled out on the couch and clutching at the cushions, warm and comfortable, plate left unwashed on the kitchen counter. But he'd bitten back a yawn as he picked up the phone and told her of course he was free.

Which was why, twenty minutes later, he and Billy Hargrove were standing opposite each other in the arcade parking lot engaged in an weird sort of stand-off. Each was leaning back against their respective car with a cigarette in hand, neither saying a word. Steve had given an awkward nod when he'd first climbed out of the car, but Hargrove hadn't returned it, just scowled and lit up. They watched, figuratively circled each other like neither knew where they stood and couldn't quite work it out, and settled in to wait for the kids to finish up. Steve didn't feel particularly hostile towards him, especially after their unexpected and confusing run-in the other night, but he had the feeling Hargrove wasn't feeling quite so civil, and he wasn't about to prod at him if it was going to get him punched.

"So," Hargrove said eventually, smoke slipping from the side of his mouth, "of all the things you could have picked to talk about, you chose the bike thing, huh."

"It got the job done, didn't it?" Steve shrugged, tapped loose ash away, was dimly surprised Hargrove had even acknowledged they'd spoken the other night, "it distracted you from whatever it was you

were trying not to think about." Hargrove looked thrown by that. Clearly he hadn't noticed that Steve had guessed something was up - the way he'd gotten all tense and demanded he say something, anything, then had suddenly eased up again as soon as Steve had gotten him talking. Didn't take a genius to figure that one out. Lucky really, because he wasn't any genius; he was just good at reading people. "Anyway, it was either that or that I got my first blow job behind the shower block at summer camp when I was fifteen. Bikes seemed safer."

"Holy shit," Hargrove snorted out a laugh, rubbed at his eye. "Who was it?"

"Who was what?" Steve shifted to look at him properly. The sun was just hitting the tops of the buildings, glaring over the flat roofs of downtown and making him squint to keep it out of his eyes.

"Don't play dumb, Harrington," he said, lolled his head back in exasperation to look at the strings of cloud streaking the sunset. "Who sucked your dick?"

"Oh. Uh, Claire Reynolds," Steve said, rubbed at the back of his neck. "Y'know, blonde - "

"I know her," Billy cut him off, sharply flicked the ash from the end of his smoke, quick and practised. "She any good?"

"I... guess." It had been three years ago and he hadn't exactly gone in with any basis for comparison. And he'd come like a fucking shot anyway, the sensation of her mouth on him new and so damn fantastic that he'd barely had the wits about him to think too much on whether it was technically good or not at the time. He turned the focus back to Hargrove instead. "So, horseback riding, huh? How's it feel to have such a wild animal between your thighs?" he said flatly. Another cheap shot, but it seemed to tickle Hargrove.

He laughed, only quietly, but loose and surprised, eyes bright. "You're really something else Harrington, you know that?"

"Whatever." Steve's eye dropped briefly, unthinkingly, down to the thickness of Hargrove's thighs under the denim.

He was surprised by the other boy's easy-goingness, though it made him even more unsure about where they stood. He'd expected Hargrove to snap and snarl and try to put Steve back in his place after talking with him like a normal person the other night. It was kinda like someone had turned his anger dial down to about a twenty, when it was usually stuck somewhere close to a hundred. Like the other day, when they'd somehow ended up sitting together in the almost-dark, talking on the porch of the empty house about how Steve had never learnt to ride a bike. He'd been different then, too. It was weird, and call him a pessimist, but he felt like he was just waiting for Hargrove to suddenly flip out on him again. He always seemed about ready to boil over; crackling and electric, a storm about to break. Steve felt more like water, brackish and still, all stuffed up with mud and silt and not quite sure what was at the bottom.

"Why are you even here?" Hargrove asked, blew out smoke and looked down at the cracked asphalt of the parking lot, avoiding Steve's face again. "Last I knew, you weren't related to any of the little assholes Maxine hangs out with."

"I uh, pick up Dustin sometimes for his mom." He was pretty sure Hargrove knew that by now, what with the amount of times they'd crossed paths in their cars and ignored each other.

"Very charitable of you, Harrington," he said, with the curling hint of a sneer.

"He's a good kid," Steve said, frowning a little at the way Hargrove was leaning forward, only ever so slightly, face angled towards him like he was actually interested in what Steve was saying. He must have been imagining it. Well, that was what he got when he dragged himself out of the house straight after a nap; a thick head and seeing things that weren't there. "They all are asshole, no matter what you've got to say about it."

"Chill out Harrington," he said through a lazy smile, leaning back to sprawl exaggeratedly against the passenger side of the Camaro, like he'd noticed he'd been tilted towards Steve and had drawn himself back again. "I didn't say anything about 'em."

"Yeah well," Steve said, fighting back a smile of his own that seemed to creep up on him out of nowhere, "you were probably thinking it."

The sun had sunk low enough to be out of his face. It was hitting Hargrove just right though, making him look all rosy in slanting orange and pink, creeping shadows from the power lines cutting stark across his chest. It was an unreal sunset, too vivid in its brightness and the shadows too dark, and Hargrove all wrapped up in smoke made gold. Jesus. If Steve could write as poetically as he was thinking about Hargrove just then, he might have done better in English class. The other boy looked lost in thought, was frowning down at his boots, tapping a finger on the car door. Steve wanted to hear him speak again, had the completely illogical need to have him smile at him again.

"So, what are you - "

"Just can it, Harrington," Hargrove looked up, any softness in his face a moment ago gone, all familiar hard, tight lines again and eyes narrowed. "I'm not fuckin' here to chit chat with you, okay? I'm just here to get my shithead of a step sister so I can go the fuck home." He threw his cigarette away without a backward glance, and stomped around to the driver's side to get back into the Camaro.

Steve was too thrown by the shift - the one hundred and eighty degree turn he'd been waiting, almost wishing for, not ten minutes ago - to react all that much. It wasn't until they'd picked up the kids and gone their own separate ways that Steve registered how annoyed at himself he was for being so surprised when the shift had actually happened.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow this one's really little. Also I've had two glasses of wine so my editing skills have gone right out the window.

4. Camouflage from Head to Toe

Notes for the Chapter:

Billy takes two steps backwards. Warnings - non-consensual junk grabbing in an unsexy locker room type scenario. Also Billy's a dick who doesn't know how to handle his feelings, but then we know this.

Ever since his cosy little chat with Harrington outside the arcade, Billy had been feeling itchy. Not like a mosquito bite or poison ivy or sand and saltwater dried onto his skin - it wasn't something he could scratch or wash away. It was under his skin, made his fingers tap against his desk, made him get through packets of both gum and cigarettes faster than normal, because he needed to be doing something. It earned him a detention or two more than usual, a slap or two more from Neil than usual, and one or two more kids slammed into the lockers than usual that week, because he felt like he was about to boil over, a cloud fit to burst. It wasn't a new sensation either. It happened any time he was stressed or riled up about something in particular that he couldn't fix. It was just a matter of waiting out his thunderous mood until it passed, or the problem fixed itself, for better or worse, as powerless as it made him feel. This time though. This time he knew exactly what it was that had him feeling like lightning was about to strike, and he knew how to make it go away. Until the next time, anyway.

See, the first time he'd bumped into Harrington, in the quiet of dusk in that old lady's crummy back yard, he'd been caught off guard. Harrington had proved an unexpected balm to his sour mood. And alright, Billy could take that shit as coincidence, and move on. The second time though, that was different. The second time, he'd sought out that balm of his own volition. Sure, he hadn't gone out looking for Harrington, they'd just crossed paths while ferrying the brats about. But he'd been there all the same, soft around the edges, sun-blurred. Had smiled tentatively, a little surprised, when Billy had started speaking to him. The mere sight of him had gotten Billy stupid. He'd wanted that soothing lightness again, that illogically safe feeling he'd gotten when Harrington had sat a little ways apart from

him in the dark backyard, and talked nonsense just because Billy had asked him to. So he'd asked him again, got Harrington talking to watch the shape of his mouth, things he wouldn't be saying if Billy had prompted it. The murmur of his voice barely audible above the evening traffic passing by making Billy once again feel calmer, softer. And it scared him. It scared him that he'd let himself get so vulnerable, if only for a few moments. Scared him how much he was clamouring for a piece of King Steve, and it scared him that Harrington could make him do that. And that was why he was feeling on the cusp of a storm, rolling and fidgety and about to break. And it was also how he knew the only way to make it stop.

Harrington was still in the shower. Billy was long since done, leaning back against a row of lockers, hair half dry and sticking to his neck, Tommy and Chris yapping away at him. The garishly orange shower room was tucked around the corner, but the spot where Billy had chosen to lean after he'd dressed lined up to allow a sliver of a view into the showers. Harrington had his back to him, a small mercy. The length of his body was all the same pale shade of winter-in-Indiana. Billy could appreciate he had a nice body - didn't mean he had to like it or him, it was just fact. He had broadish shoulders, arms more muscled than they looked at first glance. Billy liked a boy who could fight back. That night in November... no, he didn't want to think about that. He tapered to a narrower waist, softening down into an ass that Billy had absolutely no complaints about, would like to get his hands on as much as the next guy. Though considering the next guy was technically Tommy, propped up next to him along the row of lockers, that was probably a bad analogy. Hypothetically, he wouldn't mind feeling the curve of him give under his fingers, slick with suds and water, under his lips, his tongue. Given the chance, if circumstances, the universe, were different, he would have loved to literally kiss Steve Harrington's ass. To top it all off, he had legs right up to there. And that inch of height he had on Billy pissed him off more than anything. He felt a dull buzz of calm, focus, settle over him as Harrington passed them to get at his locker, still dripping and a towel around his waist.

"Hey Harrington," he said, Tommy and Chris shutting up, still and ears pricked when they realised something potentially interesting was about to go down. Harrington looked at him, wary but not with the

hostile disinterest he had done up until they'd accidentally met at the abandoned house. He didn't say anything though, and Billy ploughed ahead.

"Maybe you should start hitting the gym a little more. Lookin' kinda weedy there." He wasn't. He wasn't as thickly muscled as Billy, sure, but there was strength in his leaner, taller frame that he'd felt on the court, when Harrington bothered to play ball properly. A weak dig maybe, but as solid place to start as any. Harrington looked disappointed but unsurprised, and turned to his locker.

"What, nothing to say?" Billy refused to let go, a terrier with his teeth in a pant leg. "Not gunna roll over for me like you do with everyone else?"

Harrington just sighed and swung open his locker. "Bite me, Hargrove."

He dimly registered Tommy hooting in amusement at Harrington's lame comeback, but honestly he couldn't care less what Tommy or Chris were doing. Irritation welled up in the pit of his stomach, crawled its way up to his chest, through his arms and down to his fingers, and then he was flipping Harrington around and shoving him into the lockers.

"Shit," Harrington winced as his shoulder blade slammed into the metal door at an angle.

"Listen Harrington," Billy drawled, very much aware of the still damp skin of the other boy's shoulder under his palm. His hand twitched without his meaning it to, and Harrington's eyebrow jerked up in question. "I just wanna straighten things out here amigo, so play nice, huh?" Harrington looked a little confused, but still mostly just bored, which was not part of the plan. He needed to piss him off good and proper if he wanted to set things back how they should've been. "We're not buddies, and we're never going to be, because you're a loser." Which wasn't really true either - he might not have been 'king' anymore, but he was never exactly short on people to sit with at lunch, or to complain about their stacks of homework with. But it was the shift Billy wanted to remind him of, his fall, and Billy's replacing him. "I knocked you off your throne when I rolled into

town, King Steve. High school's almost up for you, and that's all anyone'll ever remember about you - that I took your place. I don't think anyone could give a shit about you now." Again, not true. "You hang out with a bunch of fucking preteens man. It's weird, Harrington. Even your little princess of a girlfriend realised she was onto a loser and cut her losses. If she'd rather hook her wagon up to that freak, what does that say about you, huh?" It was all a rehashed mess of things he'd heard other people say before and had mostly forgotten about by now, things he'd said before himself, but he'd keep right on saying them if it got Harrington off his case and out of his head.

"You not man enough to keep the princess happy? That it?" He moved his hand from Harrington's shoulder and reached down to make a grab at his junk. Even Tommy's laugh was a little subdued at that - they'd all showered next to Harrington and it was common knowledge he was hung. Billy's palm barely brushed the soft bulge of him through the towel before Harrington swatted his hand away, angry flush high on his cheeks.

"What the fuck man?" he said, amidst Tommy and Chris's now more confident laughter, back on familiar ground. Billy didn't answer right away, just stood back and smirked, enjoyed Harrington's frustration.

"You just ain't good enough, Stevie." He lifted his hand again to pat him on the cheek, slow and condescending, the same way his dad had done to him a thousand times to make him feel small.

Harrington looked hurt, properly hurt; soft, torn edges like overripe fruit pulled apart, vulnerable and exposed, and Billy felt a vicious delight in having been the one to make it happen. It had worked. But then it was gone again, quick enough that Billy probably wouldn't have seen it had he not been playing rapt attention, and replaced by a hard, cold sneer to rival his own. It might have sounded like a weird thing to be impressed by, but hey, he was messed up.

"When are you going to get it, Hargrove?" he said. "I just don't care enough about anything you could have to say to me. You're not as big a feature in my life as you seem to think you are."

Billy was shocked into silence, and in the end it was him who left

first, with a mumbled, half-assed threat and a half-hearted shoulder check. Because yeah, he'd wanted to put Harrington in his place, push him away, ruffle his feathers and appease his own angry, volatile mood. And he'd almost managed it too, really thought he'd set things back on track for a moment. But he'd fucked it up, like he did with everything. Despite the stinging annoyance and embarrassment at things not going how he'd wanted, he had to walk away. He didn't actually want a repeat of last November. Never again.

Notes for the Chapter:

I've written surprisingly few shower scenes, let me have this. Back at it again with the tiny chapters.

Next time - I try to patch up this mess I just made.

5. And a Heavy Monotone

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys, I feel like shit today, so here's another chapter a lot sooner than I planned.

I wanted to use the pure fuel guy in this fic, mostly just because it seems like he wasn't won over by Billy in like two seconds flat like everyone else, and calls him a douchebag during basketball. Apparently he's just called Sweaty Teen Boy/Drunk Teen on IMDB, so I'm going to go right ahead and use the actor's name, which is Drew. Which sounds sort of familiar, so I'm thinking a few people have done this before.

Steve didn't really smoke all that much any more. He'd started for the same reasons most kids had - everyone else was doing it and judged you if you didn't. At the time, he'd thought it might have gotten him some attention from his dad too, but no luck. Then Nancy hadn't liked the taste, so he'd cut back. She'd never asked him to, but he had. After that he'd just never properly started up again; had the odd smoke when he fancied it, but nothing like he used to. Still had his lighter though. The weight of it in his pocket or his palm helped him feel safe on days when he didn't, after November. He flipped it open, shut, open, shut, warm in his hand.

He was sitting in his back yard after school, trying not to look too hard at the pool, or think too hard in general. Despite the shade of the umbrella he was sprawled under, he was still over-warm where he sat in the pool chair, sniffing against the hay fever that always seemed to get him worst in late spring. It wasn't even crazy warm, but the air was thick and humid, green and heavy with pollen. He rubbed angrily at the wetness of his sore eyes, wondered if he could be bothered to go inside and get a tissue.

He'd thought about asking Drew over for a couple of hours - one of the guys who'd never followed Tommy's lead and completely ditched on him when he'd started dating Nancy - but he hadn't bothered. Mostly because he'd spent all day at school bitching about a dinner with his visiting sister and her new baby that he would definitely not

be able to get out of, so he guessed it'd be pointless to ask. Drew wasn't big on talking about feelings or the future or whatever - which most days was a bit of a relief - but he was loud and buoyant and filled up the silence of Steve's house better than anybody else. Sort of like Dustin come to think of it, but his own age. He also hadn't immediately started cosying up to Billy Hargrove the moment he'd walked into Hawkins High. Which was a key point in Steve's list of 'reasons to like someone' at the moment, after Hargrove had taken it upon himself to be a complete douchebag again in the locker room yesterday. Just when Steve had been beginning to wonder if he maybe wasn't one hundred percent asshole all the time, he'd had to get all up in Steve's face like that again, saying a bunch of crap he'd heard variations of time and time again, and were honestly pretty cheap, weak shots at trying to rile him up. None of it had really bothered him that much - it was more the fact that Hargrove had felt the need to say it at all - apart from the last bit about him not being good enough. That hit too close to home. Even weirder was that the two of them had as good as ignored each other for months. The only thing that had changed since was that they'd spoken to each other like normal people - almost - out at Mrs Burnett's old place and the arcade. He was probably making sure that Steve knew they weren't friends, that he wouldn't get too big for his boots or whatever. Which was fucking fine by him, honestly, it'd reminded him exactly why they hadn't been cosy in the first place. Asshole.

As if he'd willed him into existence, Hargrove appeared, slinking through the trees that hemmed in the Harrington's backyard like a panther, smirk visible all the way across the yard. As he got nearer though, Steve thought it looked a little fixed, uncertain. His first thought was *how the fuck does he know where I live*, before common sense kicked in and he remembered he would have picked up Max a time or two, when the party had used his place to meet when none of their parents could handle it. His second, more immediate question was *why the fuck was he there*. He fought the impulse to sit up a little straighter in the pool chair, feeling uncomfortably vulnerable as Hargrove approached, but he didn't want to give him the satisfaction of a big reaction. He'd expected Hargrove to rush to get the first word in as he came to a stop a few feet away, but he didn't. Just watched until Steve felt his resolve give and he spoke, just to get them on some kind of ground so he could figure out where he stood.

"Your entertainment options this afternoon must be pretty thin," he said, "if you dragged yourself all the way over here just to bother me some more."

"Who says I'm here to bother you?" Hargrove said.

"I'm going on past experience," he shrugged, "s'all you ever do." In one way or another.

Hargrove laughed, quiet and throaty, and licked his lips. But it wasn't in the same brash, filthy, purposely gross way it normally was, but quick and small, steadying himself before he spoke. "S'not actually why I'm here," he said, one hand on his hip, expression hard to read under his sunglasses, "but I can't promise it won't happen anyway."

"Well then, you got me," Steve said dryly, flipped his lighter shut, grounded himself with the click, "I can't think why else you'd be here."

"I'm not apologising," he said, flat and defensive.

"I wouldn't *dream* of expecting you to."

"But I have got somethin' to say."

"Oh yeah?" Steve let his head loll back a little to get a better look at him. Not that it helped much - the sun was right behind him, lighting him up all gold and indistinct, and he could barely make his face out. "Come on then Hargrove, the suspense is killing me, man."

"Don't be such a prissy bitch Harrington, I'm trying to - " he huffed and snarled and fiddled with his hair, before crossing his arms firmly across his chest. "I'm a dick."

Steve blinked. "Yeah. I'm aware of that."

Hargrove sighed, like *Steve* was the one being difficult. "I'm a dick," he repeated, "and that ain't gunna change any time soon."

"...Okay?"

Hargrove laughed bitterly, looked up the the sky as if asking for

patience. "You're going to make me say it, aren't you."

"Uh, okay." Steve was lost. He didn't have the greatest track record at stuff like this, despite normally being okay at reading people when it came to the small stuff. But this was next level; Hargrove was on a completely different page to him. Maybe even a whole different book. "Say what?"

"Look Harrington," he said, "hanging out with you... may not be the worst thing in the world."

"Gee, thanks."

"I mean - fuck. Just maybe it wouldn't suck if it happened again from time to time. Y'know."

Steve did not know. "You want to hang out?"

"Did I stutter?" Hargrove shook his head, annoyed, like a horse trying to shake off a fly. "I'm just saying, that if we do, you gotta understand that I'm not... always easy to be around, okay. I say shit I shouldn't."

"Is this about you being a jerk in the showers?"

"No," Hargrove said quickly. It definitely was. He sighed, deflated a little, shot Steve a glare like it was *his* fault he was a dick. "A bit."

"So, you're saying you want to hang out, but if you're a complete asshole to me, I have to just let it slide because you can't help it?" Yeah, no, that was not happening.

From what little Steve could see of his face, Hargrove looked pained. Good. "No, of course not idiot, I just..." he stood his ground, kept his attention fixed on Steve as he felt out his next words, "don't want you to be surprised when I fuck it up."

"Right." The whole thing had taken several turns Steve hadn't been expecting pretty quick, was about the most serious, most uncertain he'd ever heard Hargrove sound. "I'm gunna be honest with you here man, I really don't know what to say to that." Hargrove just sort of grunted. "You wanna sit down?"

"If you want." He sat on the pool chair about a foot away from Steve's, carefully like it might break or he might scare Steve away with any sudden movements. Honestly, Steve was starting to feel like it might be the other way around.

He snapped his lighter open. Closed. The whole back yard was green and dappled under the trees, the two of them sitting in the last patch of sunshine. Hargrove wasn't looking at him, but he was listening. Steve could tell from the way he stayed tense where he sat, head tilted a little to the side, the way his finger twitched when Steve flicked the lighter. Steve could smell him, they were sitting so close. He smelt like the inside of a hot car - sweat, cologne, cigarettes and leather seats. Hargrove was... he looked good. He was chewing on his lip while avoiding Steve's eye, before switching it up to his thumbnail instead. Steve didn't think he even realised he was doing it. Denim pulled tight over his legs when he sat, and maybe it was weird that it was the second time in a fairly short period that Steve's attention had caught and stuck on Hargrove's thighs. He looked so uncertain, so uncharacteristically half ready to bolt, that somewhere in the back of Steve's head was the idea that if he petted Hargrove's hair a little, stroked the top of his head, he might feel a little better. It was something he'd used to do for Nancy when she was frazzled, and the association was a bit too much for him to unpack just then.

"I didn't know you had a pool," Hargrove said a little while later, and Steve tried to hide the fact that he'd jumped.

"Uh, yeah." Steve was surprised Tommy or whoever hadn't mentioned it, if only for the reason of providing another thing that Hargrove might've liked to poke fun at him for.

"Dunno why I'm surprised," he said. "You're a classic little rich boy, after all."

"If you say so." Steve's dad had had it put in for his mom. She never used it - she didn't like pool water getting to her hair.

"You ever hook up in it?"

It shouldn't have surprised him that that was the first thing Hargrove would ask. "Yeah." He'd only ever kissed Nance in the pool, but

before her, before everything, he'd definitely done a lot more with other girls at other parties he'd had.

"How was it?"

"Wet." He'd been drunk or halfway there every time, the overriding memory being his hand slippery with pool water when he'd eased his palm down into a bikini top, chlorine water sharp on his tongue and the back of his throat as he kissed at a girl's neck, mixing with the alcohol and making him feel nauseous.

Hargrove laughed, a delighted, throaty cackle that Steve couldn't help smiling in response to. "Yeah I guess it would be."

"Have you? Not in *this* pool, I mean. Any."

"Nah," he said. "I have in the ocean though."

"Huh." Steve could sort of imagine it, or a caricature of it anyway, Hargrove all gold and muscle, holding some girl up against him in the blue waters, sucking saltwater kisses into her neck.

"You okay there Harrington?"

"Yeah... why?"

"You're looking a little snifflly. Did I make you cry?" He looked positively delighted about it, the asshole.

"No you dickhead," he sniffed, "I have hay fever."

"Yeah yeah pretty boy, oldest excuse in the book."

"Thought that was onions."

"Yeah well, I don't see any of those." There was a brief silence while Steve wiped at his eyes and Hargrove's smile faded. He cleared his throat. "That shit I said about you..."

"Yeah?" Steve stiffened, wondering if he was about to sit through yet another rendition of *'Reasons why Steve Harrington isn't good enough.'*

"It was all bullshit."

He waited, wondered if Hargrove was holding his breath or if he was just imagining it. "I know."

"S'just easier to be a dick to you than to be nice."

"Nice?" Steve said, properly thrown off track now, and wondering if what he was currently listening to was Hargrove's version of an apology after all. "You *know* that word?"

"Fuck you Harrington," he said, shoved gently at Steve's shoulder without any real force. Steve grinned and shoved him back, and just like that, things were different. It was a shitty apology, didn't really make up for all the crap that had passed between them, but it was a step away from all of that, and one Steve wanted to take.

Notes for the Chapter:

Bit of a quick fix and very unlikely Billiam would be so upfront about feelings, I know. But I just don't want to linger too long on the angst, you feel me?

6. You've Gotta Let Things Go

Notes for the Chapter:

More slurs and boys being dicks.

I think at this point it's the rules that something cherry flavoured has to pop up at some point.

"I don't know, I mean I was pretty good at baseball," Harrington said, took another long sip from his Slurpee. Or whatever the off brand version they sold in fucking Hawkins was called. It made that fucking annoying sound through the straw that made Billy kinda want to slap it out of his hand. He watched him swallow. "Until I decided it wasn't cool anymore, y'know? So I stopped."

"Aw, did King Steve's subjects think he was too cool for baseball?" It was hot where they sat in the parking lot behind the store, once again warmer than Billy would have expected for the first, early days of summer in Hawkins. He was actually a little sweaty under his jacket, prickly and damp around the collar and the small of his back.

"Yeah, basically," Harrington sent him a kinda funny, lop-sided smile, one that he'd only rarely let slip in the past couple of weeks they'd been hanging out, but one that Billy'd decided he was going to see more of.

"Careful up there."

"Huh?" Harrington's mouth was a little slack, all pinked up with artificial cherry.

"Don't want you to fall off your high horse, Harrington. Jesus," Billy said like he didn't love it when Harrington got all cocky. When he acted like there was something more to him under the smooth, glassy surface he'd been hiding behind that had always made him seem untouchable no matter what Billy had thrown at him.

"Shut up," he pulled out his straw to flick ice at Billy. He missed. Billy didn't though, a spatter of coke fake-Slurpee hitting Harrington's cheek with a satisfying little splat. "Asshole," he hissed as he wiped it

off, "that's fucking cold."

"You started it," Billy chewed on his straw in triumph.

"Whatever," Harrington said, wiped his fingers on his jeans. "I was okay at track too. But not when the weather got really hot - hay fever kinda fucked me over."

Billy grunted and thought about the day a couple weeks back when he'd let himself into Harrington's back yard, had taken one look at his red, watery eyes and had wanted to bring him tissues. "I used to skip track," Billy said, put aside the warming remains of his drink in favour of a smoke, "'s for pussies."

"C'mon man," Harrington waved him away, "you're just saying that because you're bad at it."

"No." Yes. Not bad, just not the best.

"I swam too."

"Jesus, pretty boy," he said as Harrington held out his lighter to him. It was weird that he had one, Billy hardly ever saw him smoke. Sentimental maybe, like the tiny woven key chain his mom had made that he kept clipped to his car keys. "Is there anything you can't do?" He tried not to think too hard about Harrington in those lame, fucking tiny bathing suits the swim team wore in Hawkins High colours.

"Yeah," he smiled at him, an easy, secretive thing, like it was some big private joke they were both in on. He guessed it kind of was. "Ride a bike."

None of it was helped by the fact that Harrington looked good. He did most of the time; good in a fucking stupid, dorky way that Billy was starting to let himself admit in the privacy of his own head. Fucking preppy ass green and white striped polo, open collar showing his still pale throat, the mole on his neck. Billy wondered if he tanned in the summer, or if he just burned and went pink. He had sunglasses on, as Billy did, so he couldn't see his eyes. But he could see the quirk of his lips or flash of teeth when he laughed, mouth stained that

fruity fake red.

"So, King Steve," he said to distract himself, took a long drag of his cigarette, "we buddies yet or what?"

"Ugh," Harrington made a face, "I hope not."

Billy cracked a grin in return, settled himself back on the sun-warm asphalt.

It was wiped right off his face though, when Tommy and a few of the other guys from basketball strolled out of the store and around the corner. And it wasn't like he hated them or anything, honestly he was mostly indifferent - they were okay to play ball and party with - but hanging out with them and hanging out with Harrington were completely different things.

"There you are Hargrove," Tommy said as he sauntered over, two of the other boys right on his heels, excited and twitching like goddamn puppies over the possibility of a tussle. The third mostly looked bored with the lot of them, and bit into a candy bar. "The hell are you hanging out with this fag for?"

"Jesus," Harrington just rolled his eyes, let the words roll off him too, just like when Billy had tried to get a rise out of him in the locker room. But something in Billy scrunched up at hearing that word, the one he'd grown to associate with a slap to the face, being so casually tossed at Harrington. Especially when it was him that really deserved it. But he'd been having a grand old time just chatting shit with Harrington until that prick had shown up to ruin it, and honestly he really couldn't be bothered to deal with his shit.

"What do you want?" he said, frowning and leaning lazily up against the wall where he sat. He really couldn't be fucked with the niceties.

Tommy's smirk faltered a bit, like he hadn't been expecting such a curt answer from him. Fucking stupid on his part; he should have known Billy was an asshole by now.

"Nothing," he said, defensive, smile not quite as sure as it had been when he'd first spotted Billy. Pathetic. Still, he didnt like the

imbalance of he and Harrington sitting while they stood; it made him twitchy. "Just wondered why we haven't been seeing you around so much lately." Which was a dumb thing to say; Billy had never hung around with them much anyway unless they were at school or there was a party to go to. It was a Saturday, and there was neither. Tommy must have known he was onto a losing battle with Billy, and turned his attention to Harrington. "You though. I know exactly why we never see you around. Not babysitting today, King Steve?" Billy relished the sound of that nickname out of his own mouth. Funny then, how hearing it out of Tommy's made Billy want to smack him.

"Nope," Steve said, swirled the dregs of his off-brand Slurpee around like it was fucking brandy or some shit. "But I did spend a couple hours in your sister's room," he looked up, smiled pleasantly at Tommy like they were talking about the goddamn weather, "her mattress has *great* back support. She says hi." Billy'd never seen Tommy H's sister, but rumour had it she was smokin'. Like, stupid hot. Safe to say she must've gotten all the looks in the family.

"That how you wanna play, Steve?" Tommy said, face screwed up, more pissed than Billy thought Harrington's weak jab warranted and apparently mad enough to forgo any kind of dumb name calling and get straight to business. "Fine."

"Oh come on man," said the kid with the candy bar who was either called Drew or Don - Billy didn't really care - loudly and obviously bored with the whole thing. Honestly, Billy was too. "Let it go. Jesus, no one else even cares anymore Tommy. Just you bro."

Apparently Tommy was as good at listening to sound advice as he was at playing ball, because he completely ignored it. "I should have done this fucking ages ago, when you bailed on me and Carol in that fucking parking lot after you let Byers beat your face in."

Which Billy thought was pretty big talk, all just piss and vinegar, until Tommy was striding across the short distance to where Harrington was sitting, fists clenched and face hot with irritation. Billy dimly wondered if he'd ever seen Tommy H show so much independent thought before in the few months he'd been tagging along in Billy's shadow. He didn't have time to think much else though, only that his anger was aimed at Harrington and that was *not*

okay, before he stood, grabbed his cup and hurled the remains of his crappy Slurpee right at Tommy's face.

There was a moment of shocked silence, Harrington's eyes gone all big and surprised, mouth a little pink 'o.' It was broken when Tommy lunged at Billy, slush dripping onto his shirt, and he planted his feet ready to absorb the blow, snarling and fists raised to strike back. But before he could even take a swing, a strong arm looped around his chest and held him fast, startling Billy into inaction.

"Don't." Harrington's voice was quiet but firm in his ear, breath all hot and fake sugary cherries. Billy tensed up, felt Harrington's arm tighten on him in response. There was half a second where Billy wondered if he might throw Harrington off, push him away or hit him, which would have been pretty counter productive considering how hard he'd tried to stop Tommy doing just that moments ago.

Drew-or-Don had grabbed hold of Tommy too, was using the size he had on him to hold him back. "Yeah yeah, come on," he said as he started to manhandle Tommy out of the parking lot, shooting a regretful glance at the candy bar he'd dropped on the floor in the scramble, "you asked for it, dickweed." Tommy spluttered, still wiping the slush from his eyes, but let himself be steered away from them. "Catch you later Steve. Hargrove."

"Yeah," Harrington said, voice so close to Billy's ear it made him flinch, still gripping him tight, "thanks Drew." The other two guys threw them a sheepish grimace and wave before following after. Pussies.

"You gonna let me go now?" Billy said.

"Only if you're sure you're okay," Harrington said. Billy could feel the rumble of his voice in his chest. "Are you?"

He swallowed. "Yeah."

"Good." Harrington let go of him, and Billy was shockingly aware of the absence of the weight of his arm around him, the length of him pressed close down his side. "You didn't have to do that, man."

"He was your best friend, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Then what the fuck is his problem?" He knew the basics, had sniffed out the gossip surrounding King Steve the moment he'd got to Hawkins High, had hurled it against him along with the rest when Wheeler had ditched on him. But he wanted to hear what Harrington had to say about it, ever embarrassingly keen to nose his way into all of his business.

"Thought you'd know all about it by now," Harrington said, not bitterly exactly, but like it brought an old, bad taste to his mouth that he'd almost forgotten about. "He's been hanging off you since last fall. And you do already know - you've been a dick to me about it more than once."

"Wheeler?"

"Yeah."

"Alright," Billy said. Who fucking didn't know about Wheeler ditching him for Byers? Kids three schools over had been gossiping about that shit last Halloween. "I only heard about the princess dumping you," he said, ignored the way that made Harrington's mouth twist. "Still a mystery to me why Tommy had such a stick up his goddamn ass about her in the first place."

"I guess I sort of... chose her over Tommy when we first got together? But he was being an asshole," Harrington said with a shrug, more flippant than Billy thought he probably felt, "and I'd do it again." Billy thought it might have been a bad time to point out that he now had neither Tommy or Wheeler. "You wanna get out of here?"

"Yeah."

Harrington smiled. "Let's go for a drive."

Notes for the Chapter:

I may or may not have plans for Tommy.

7. And if They Do it's Fine

Notes for the Chapter:

A little but sort of important one. Also, the plan is now one chapter longer than originally whoops.

"Steve, buddy?" Dustin frowned at him across the table, smear of hot fudge on his cheek, "why are you looking at me all weird?"

"Because," Steve said, squinting, hand over his eyes against the sunset streaming in through the diner window, "*somebody* picked a shitty place to sit, and I'm getting blinded."

"What? Are you kidding, Steve?" Dustin said, outraged. "This is the best table they've got."

"He has a point," Lucas piped up before diving back into his banana split, "there's a system."

"Of course there is," Steve mumbled into his coffee.

"It's got a great view, the table doesn't wobble, and it's the exact equal distance between the counter, the bathroom and the jukebox," Dustin checked them off on his fingers one by one. "And it's a booth seat. A *booth*, Steve."

"Yeah well," Steve said, shifting a little, plastic seat squeaking, "that doesn't stop my eyes getting burned out of the sockets."

"Shift up, pretty boy," Hargrove's voice in his ear made him jump, and set Dustin and Lucas off sniggering into their ice cream. Before he could argue, Billy was pushing him, impatient but not roughly, so he slid along the booth seat and out of the direct sunlight. Then Billy was sitting next to him, pleased with himself, sunglasses on against the glare and earring catching the light. "Better?"

"You brought *him*?" Dustin said to Max as she shuffled in to the booth to sit alongside him and Lucas. *Who's laughing now, Henderson.*

"Yeah, so?" she said, back up like an aggravated cat. Her hair was up

in a rainbow scrunchie he thought belonged to El, and which did absolutely nothing to soften the defensive glare she was giving the two boys. The kids had all sort of gotten used to Steve and Billy hanging out, to him gradually staying longer and longer with them after he'd dropped Max off, but they still weren't all that happy about it.

"So, it's like there's a goddamn lion sitting at the table," Dustin said, leaning back away from Billy a little, and shaking his head, "it's unnerving, is what it is." Though honestly Steve knew he couldn't have been as intimidated by Billy as he was to begin with, if he was brave enough to say something like that to his face. Hargrove just grinned, sharp and feral, and proved Dustin's point better than words ever could by reaching to pluck the cherry off of his sundae.

Dustin narrowed his eyes at him. "You're just lucky I don't like cherries, pal."

"God, why d'you always have to be so dramatic?" Lucas said - they'd been friends for years, and the way Lucas acted so surprised every time Dustin got overexcited about something like he hadn't been expecting it was actually kinda cute, the little idiots - and shot him an annoyed look before frowning, thoughtful, at Billy. "He's fine."

Hargrove grinned, all up in Steve's space, practically purring, before he turned to look at Dustin. "See, Henderson?" he said. "I'm *fine*."

"Yeah yeah, glowing praise, I'm sure," Dustin said, took an angry spoonful of hot fudge.

Hargrove looked a little outraged at that - although honestly Steve sometimes wasn't sure what was for show and what wasn't with Billy - Max smug, and Steve had to hide a grin in his coffee mug. He knew Billy had sort of made peace with Lucas a couple of weeks back, but he hadn't seen any actual evidence of it until just then. Catching Max's eye across the table, he winked, and she grinned back.

"Aragorn's obviously the coolest," Lucas was saying when Steve checked back in to the conversation, and he prepared himself to zone out again as they argued over something nerdy he'd never heard of. "I mean *come on*."

"No no no Lucas, Gandalf is way cooler, he saves everyone's butt like five times," Dustin said. "If Will was here, he'd back me up."

"Yeah well he's not," Lucas said, "so suck it up, and admit Aragorn is cooler."

"Actually, where is Will?" Steve cut across whatever the hell it was they were arguing about. "And Mike?" Mike still wasn't thrilled about Steve hanging around so much in general, but it wasn't like either of them to turn down a ride to go get ice cream.

"They've gone to see El," Dustin said, and Lucas elbowed him hard in the side and looked pointedly at Billy. "Ow! Son of a bitch, it's not like he's going to know who she is, Jesus."

"Oh my God, you're making it worse," Lucas hissed.

"You're the one who started - "

"Let me save you the trouble," Billy drawled, pulled a squashed carton of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket, "and tell you right now that I don't give a shit who you're talking about. And also you're both wrong. Frodo is obviously the most badass, Sam a close second."

"Wait, wait," Dustin said, pressed a hand to his forehead in the manner of an exasperated teacher struggling to understand their pupil, "you've read the Lord of the Rings?"

"Of course I have, shithead," Billy put a cigarette between his teeth, "there's fuck all else to do here, might as well crack open a goddamn book."

Dustin and Lucas gaped at him, Max rolled her eyes at the lot of them, and Steve waved down the waitress for another cup of coffee.

It wasn't long before everyone was bickering again. Billy and Max were arguing now, though Steve had lost track of what about. But it wasn't the biting, cruel way full of genuine anger that he'd seen between them before. It almost friendly, laughing between the ridiculous and precision insults they threw back and forth across the tabletop smeared with melted ice cream. Billy threw his head back and laughed, full and loud and drawing attention from other tables at

something dumb Max had called him. It would have felt the most normal, easy thing in the world to move those last few inches and fling an arm around Billy's shoulder, pull him into his side and kiss his cheek... fuck. That was new.

But it wasn't, not really. He'd known it for a while, just never let himself think about it properly, never called it what he knew it was because it was easier that way. Steve liked him. God, he more than liked him... He was lovely, gorgeous, an absolute dick, with at least as much baggage as Steve had, probably more. But fuck, he wanted him. He enjoyed the time they spent together, shoving at each other, pushing buttons and laughing at each other's affronted faces. He liked looking at him, listening to him, liked the way Max wasn't afraid to slug him on the arm anymore, the way Lucas rolled his eyes at him and Dustin's surprised snort of laughter when Billy sent a spitball at his little sister. He liked the tiny scars on Billy's forearms that mapped out years of everyday life; of fiddling with cars, being drunk and fumbling cigarettes, childhood falls onto asphalt, maybe getting scratched up playing at his grandparents farm. He liked the way he'd hurled his Slurpee at Tommy when he'd gotten in Steve's face, and the way the sun had shone behind him when he'd slinked into Steve's backyard to tell him why they probably shouldn't be friends. He liked the feel of Billy's thigh pressed against his, could barely feel the warmth of him through the denim, but the weight of him was inescapable.

The whole thing wasn't a surprise so much things shifting and settling a little closer to where Steve had suspected they would for a while now. That Billy was a guy... wasn't a problem. Well, it was a problem in the way that he couldn't just stroll on over and ask for a date like he could with a girl. He hadn't known it was even possible for someone to think both girls and guys were hot for a long time, hadn't realised it was a thing. He'd always liked girls you see; thought they were cute, enjoyed flirting with them, enjoyed kissing them, hooking up with them, so what was there to be confused over? He'd never had the need to question it until after Nance and last November, when he was questioning a lot of things, had given it some thought and realised the guys he'd always thought were cool in movies and shows on the front of magazines was maybe a little more than just admiration. So yeah, realising he had a crush on Billy the size of

Alaska wasn't a huge surprise, or a problem in itself. No, the problem was that Billy was obviously, painfully, and violently straight.

By the time they'd all parted ways, Steve had dropped off Dustin and Lucas and gotten home, he'd decided something. That he really needed to talk to somebody who wasn't still in middle school or Billy himself about how he was feeling. He shut the front door, and picked up the phone.

"Hey. Yeah, fine. I - can you come over?"

Notes for the Chapter:

Same Steve, SAME.

Side note, it's Trixie Mattel's birthday today, so thanks Trixie, for unknowingly providing chapter titles for my Stranger Things fanfiction <3

8. I'm Someone Else

Notes for the Chapter:

I know I've been alternating, but here's more Steve. This chapter was originally going to be Steve talking to Nancy about stuff. But then I thought y'know what, that's been done a lot before, I'm going to try this instead. There's some low key Tommy redemption ahead, so if you really hate him lol sorry. Warnings for slurs and boys being gross.

Nancy hadn't been able to come over in the end. She'd had calc homework to finish, had promised her mom a catch-up while they made dinner, and then had to watch Mike and Holly while her parents were out at a neighbours'. Although watching Mike, she'd admitted, felt a little bit redundant sometimes. He could understand that. Over the phone, she'd sounded tired, spread thin, so Steve hadn't pressed and had let her go, with a promise to call her again tomorrow night if he still wanted to talk.

It was tomorrow now, and he didn't think he did want to talk anymore. Though he felt kinda bad for thinking it, he was glad she hadn't come over, glad he hadn't spilled the mess of *stuff* he was feeling to her just yet. She still knew him better than anyone, probably, was unlikely to hit him or go blabbing if he told her, which should have made her his safest bet. But while they were at a place where they could talk about the kids, school, music, whatever, he was pretty sure they weren't quite ready for what he'd been planning on saying. It probably wasn't the sort of thing she wanted to hear from an ex, either.

He'd almost asked her about it once before, but chickened out. Of course he knew she could never hate him for it, but they were dating at the time, and 'hey babe, do you think it's possible for someone to like both guys *and* girls?' hadn't seemed like an okay thing to ask a girlfriend. Since they'd split, he'd been trying to figure himself out a little better - in a lot of ways really, but uh, sexually, in particular - and he was finally feeling like he needed to talk about it. He'd been wondering if he liked guys for a long while, but it was after getting to

know Billy that it was clicked into a solid yes. Like fuck he was telling her that part though; he didn't think he could handle the pity he knew he'd see on her face if he told her he was half in love with his straight best friend.

The bus hit a bump in the road, and everything came back into focus. The basketball team was headed to an out of season friendly against Northern, allegedly as a sort of team bonding, last-time-we'll-all-play-together-before-graduation thing, but everyone knew their two coaches had some intense rivalry, and couldn't let the school year go by without one last bash at it.

"I just need her to get off my ass about it for like two seconds, y'know?" Drew was saying from the seat next to him. Steve tried to remember the details of what they were talking about. Well, Drew was talking, he was listening. Not very well though, apparently. "Like, she's not ready to meet you mom, get it through your head."

"Yeah."

"Right?" Drew nodded. "Fucking stupid thing is, they'd probably get on okay together. Both have mad crushes on the same dumb actors, both like the same shitty wine... I can't go a day without 'Oh Andrew, when am I going to meet this lovely girlfriend of yours?' And I'm just there like, um, never, because the minute you see her nose ring you're going to flip your shit, mom." He banged his head back against the seat in frustration. They were sitting at the back of the bus, but most of the team were grouped mid way down or up front to pester the unfortunate lady bus driver. Seemed like she was giving as good as she got though, from all the hollering going on. "And I don't wanna fight with April over it, y'know? She's a good girl, good weed and a great rack, and I just can't fuck that up. She's important to me, y'know?"

"Sure."

Steve was reminded of when he'd first met a thirteen year old Drew. He'd been the new kid in middle school, grazed elbows and a smudge of dirt on his face, saying that he didn't ever want a girlfriend and that he was going to be a professional monster truck driver one day. And April was nice, from what Steve knew of her. But Drew was right

- her nose piercing and pink hair would probably make his mom faint. He and Nance had never had to deal with anything like that; Nancy's mom loved Steve, and Steve's mom had liked Nancy when she'd met her, but tended to forget she existed as soon as she left the house again.

"How about you, Harrington?" Drew popped his neck, winced. "You back in the game yet? Scored any pussy?"

"Uh..." Fuck. Drew didn't ever ask that kind of shit. It was why Steve liked to hang with him. The answer was a solid no, which he was more than okay about, what with the whole Billy thing, but it still sounded pathetic. "Not right now, no."

"Sucks."

"Yeah."

"April'll probably jerk you off if I ask her. She's always said you're cool."

"Uh, thanks?" Steve said, not sure what the fuck he was expected to say to that. "I'm okay though."

"Whatever man," Drew just shrugged like what he'd offered was completely normal, "suit yourself."

Before Steve could figure out how to shift their chat back to something less fucking weird, he was saved the trouble by Tommy. An unexpected escape route, but one he was sure as hell going to take.

"Hey D, hop it man," Tommy said as he made his way up the bus, "I gotta talk to Harrington."

Steve looked him over warily, wondering what his play was, considering that last time they'd spoken, Tommy had been about to scratch his face off. They'd gone right back to ignoring each other at school, after that. Even Drew looked a bit stumped for a minute, mouth slack, weighing Tommy up with just as much suspicion as Steve. But he must have passed some sort of test that only existed in Drew's head, because he rolled his eyes and sighed like the whole

thing was the biggest inconvenience in the world.

"Fine," he grabbed hold of the seat in front to pull himself up, unsteady on the moving bus, "just don't start hitting each other, I'm too hungover to deal with that shit."

"Yeah yeah, I'll have him back in one piece, *mom*," Tommy laughed as he swung himself into Drew's empty seat.

"Shut the fuck up Tommy, or I'll sit on you," Drew said as he made his way precariously down the bus to sit with the rest of the team.

"What d'you want, Tommy?" Steve said. If he was looking for a fight, as dumb a place as on a bus full of people might have been, he'd rather get it over with. That was all it could be, after their messy little run-in in the store parking lot; Tommy trying to smooth over his wounded pride.

"I missed you."

"What?" For a second, Steve thought he must have misheard. He looked across at Tommy, who looked sort of disgusted at the words that had just left his mouth, like he'd love to shove them back in and pretend he hadn't said them. He was pale under his freckles - probably in part because of his tendency to get motion sickness that Steve was more familiar with than he wanted to be - mouth quirked in a wince as he avoided Steve's eye and looked down the bus instead.

"You heard," Tommy mumbled, defensive, still not looking at him. "I don't want school to end with us pissed at each other, man."

"Right." Steve hadn't spared it or him much thought, what with everything else he had to think about. And if he had thought of Tommy, it was mostly just to be glad he was out of his hair.

"We were best friends when it started. You and me Stevie, all the way through, we had each other's backs." Tommy sounded like he actually cared; it was about the most actual emotion Steve had seen out of him since that time two years ago when he and Carol had broken up for a week. He didn't really know what to do with it. "I never ditched

you when me and Carol hooked up," he said. Which... was actually true. They might have snuck off to suck face a lot, and Steve had definitely seen a lot more of the pair of them than he'd ever wanted to when he'd accidentally stumbled across them now and then, but they'd never fallen out over it. Difference was, Carol was just as much of an asshole as Tommy and Steve were. Nancy wasn't. "It really fucking sucked when you ditched us for Nancy fucking Wheeler, of all people. Sorta hated you for it, for a while. A long while," he shook his head, looked down at his chewed up fingernails. "You changed everything, and I was really fucking mad about it. But I'm done being mad."

"That's really fucking big of you, Tommy," Steve said coolly. "What if I'm not?" It wasn't only Tommy that'd gotten his goddamn feelings hurt in that mess.

"Come on man, I don't want to look back in twenty years and remember the bad shit more than the good, y'know?" It must have been the deepest thing he'd ever heard Tommy say, and he couldn't help but wonder how much of it was actually sincere. It was more likely that, since he was at odds with both Steve and Billy, he was feeling lost without someone to tag along with. No doubt he deemed Steve a softer touch to crawl back to. He was probably right about that, but he would have thought the method of getting back into Billy's good books - dumping a random freshman he picked out in the trash or whatever - would have been more to his taste. Maybe Tommy was starting to see a little sense, maybe not. Either way, Steve just plain couldn't be bothered to butt heads with him anymore.

"Fine," he said eventually. They wouldn't be anything like what they were before, and that was alright, he didn't need them to be. But there was some stuff he had with Tommy that he'd never have with anyone else. Also there was something he really, really needed to talk about, and Tommy might have been the best option, surprisingly, if he really was serious about making up. "We're cool." The relief that came with saying it was only slight, but thorough, like a whole, thin layer of something had been lifted off of his body.

"Cool," Tommy said, and smiled. His actual smile, the one he smiled when they were ten and Steve used to share his allowance with him. "Thanks."

"Tommy," Steve said, and it was his turn to avoid eye contact, "look, you - you're really sure about all this friends again, got each other's backs shit?" He was about to do something probably really fucking stupid, but he was desperate to talk about it, and Tommy was maybe the only person who already sort of knew. Fuck it. Since they were talking about feelings and shit already, and Tommy seemed so keen to make up, he just as well do it now.

"That's what I said."

"Okay. Then, can I tell you something?" When Tommy had stumbled across Steve and Billy hanging out behind the store, he'd called Steve a fag. He knew he'd meant it as a generic insult to get a rise out of him rather than a pointed jab about him personally, but still. It had made him tense up a little at the time, made him wonder if today was the day he told everyone. It was exactly the sort of crap he would have dished out himself a couple years back too, which now just made him feel extra shitty. He just had to hope there was enough of his 'best friend Tommy' still in there, the one who he used to tell everything, that he wasn't about to sign his own death warrant. Hoped there was enough of that to overrule the douchebag part of him that Steve had probably once encouraged.

"Sure," Tommy said, already visibly relaxed after their sort-of friendship reboot. He turned to look at Steve, head lolled back on the headrest, and suddenly he felt like a kid again, on his bedroom floor in sleeping bags, telling each other their favourite TV characters like it was the biggest secret in the world. "What is it, Stevie?"

He hesitated, breath caught in the back of his throat, really hoped that Tommy'd meant what he'd said. "You remember Charlie, right?"

He felt Tommy go still next to him. Heard him swallow. "Yeah."

"Right. Good." They'd been twelve, Charlie Simmons a new kid in their class. Steve had whispered to Tommy that he thought Charlie was pretty, just young enough, naive and sheltered by his parents enough, for it to not even occur to him that anyone might have a problem with it. Tommy's older brother however, had said enough about things like that at home that Tommy knew better, had told Steve not to be dumb and maybe he shouldn't say that again, because

it was bad. The serious look on Tommy's face had scared Steve enough that he'd never repeated it. Charlie was gone again in five months time - an army brat - and they'd never said anything else about it. Steve was surprised Tommy hadn't ever brought it up again actually, especially during their most recent stint of hating each other. He'd been half-expecting it ever since November, and again the other day in the store parking lot. It would have been a low fucking blow, but one that would have thoroughly put Steve out of favour, and no doubt gotten Tommy a lot more attention from Hargrove. The fact that he never had was another reason Steve felt compelled to talk about it with him right then. "Well, turns out that wasn't just me being a confused kid," he lowered his voice. "I - I like both, Tommy."

There was a moment of silence that felt like an absolute fucking eternity, before Tommy spoke. "Both what?"

"Don't be an asshole Tommy, I - "

He laughed and carelessly slapped Steve on the shoulder. "Yeah yeah, calm down Stevie. I know."

"What?"

"And here was me thinking it was going to be something important."

"You *know*?"

"After the Charlie thing?" Tommy rolled his eyes. "I'm not as dumb as all that."

"So what, you just knew, all this time?" Steve said, voice still low, shooting a glance down to the rest of the team. It seemed fucking ridiculously unfair that Tommy could have been so sure about it when Steve had had no fucking idea.

"More of a feeling than like, actually knowing," he shrugged. "You and Carol made me go and see Blade Runner four times. I knew she was in it for Harrison Ford, and I sorta wondered if you were too."

"Huh." Well shit. He was probably onto something there.

"So what's the problem? You crushing on someone or some shit? It's

not me is it?" He batted his eyes, and Steve whacked him on the arm.

"No it sure as fuck is not. I don't know, I just needed to - to - fuck, *tell* someone. And I guessed you might have already, y'know," he repeated Tommy's words from earlier, "had a feeling."

"Maybe you should just hook up with someone," Tommy said. "Take it for a test drive, y'know? No point in sulking over it before you even really know what you're dealing with."

"Who the fuck did you have in mind?" Steve hissed, shooting a worried look down the bus, half expecting the team to be listening in, "not like people have signs over their heads, Jesus. There's nobody here like... that."

"A whole bunch of basketball guys from Northern and Hillside are coming to Joanne's party next Saturday," Tommy said. "Maybe one of them can sort you out."

Steve snorted. "Like it's that easy."

"Don't be so negative Stevie. It might be," Tommy shrugged. "Just don't do it anywhere near me, I don't need to see that shit."

"Dick." Steve shoved at him again. But actually he was feeling kinda great, after finally voicing what had been eating him up gradually over the past weeks. Was, until he looked up and saw Hargrove frowning at him from halfway down the bus, slouched and a little sulky. He sent him a sort of smile, but he didn't return it, and Steve had no idea what he'd done to piss him off this time. Maybe just an off day - he had those, and Steve knew by now when it was better to leave him be. He'd been hoping to sit with him on the journey, childish as that sounded, but Hargrove had been late and Drew had sat down before he could do anything about it. Maybe the game had got him worked up? Nah, Steve knew he didn't get nervous; if anything he played better wound up, enjoyed it even. Still, that didn't stop him from wishing it was Billy sprawled in the seat next to him, as relieved as he was to have had that chat with Tommy, teasing him about planting his feet.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry there wasn't much Bills, I'll make up for it next time.

9. Spend the Day Regretting

Notes for the Chapter:

Some of that sweet Billy PoV

Billy was pissed. And the fact that he was pissed for such a goddamn stupid reason was only making him even more pissed. He was pretty sure nothing could pull him out of it by that point either, he was so thoroughly twisted out of shape and determined to stay mad. If he didn't stay angry, he'd feel something considerably more pathetic, which yeah, no thanks. If he was lucky, he'd be able to get his head together enough not to play like total shit once they reached Northern, but in the mean time he had the rest of the bus journey to stew in the bad mood he'd worked himself into.

He'd been going to sit with Harrington. He'd gotten an embarrassing, childish kick out of the thought of sitting next to him for the hour long bus ride, but he was so goddamn giddy over it he hadn't been able to bring himself to care. But then he'd gotten into it over nothing with his dad - the bastard had probably sensed his good mood and decided he needed to ruin it - and had ended up a little late getting to the bus. Which had mostly just added to the indignity of having to sit on the bus with the team when he had a perfectly good car in the first place. Although it wasn't enforced, during their last practice coach had suggested it would be good for morale to ride there together. Billy's first thought on that had been a strong fuck no, but then Harrington had snorted with laughter and elbowed Billy in the side, and he'd known then he'd be getting the bus with the rest of 'em. All of which had ended up with him facing a reality more irritating than the stinging redness on his cheek his dad had left - that he couldn't sit with Harrington after all.

It wasn't through design, but there always seemed to be space between them - a gap across the table at the diner, armrest separating them at the movies, or two feet between them in the front of Billy's car, leaning on opposite sides of the hood of the Beemer. And once he'd noticed it, he couldn't stop noticing it. He'd already half-imagined all the excuses he could find to touch Harrington during the drive; thighs pressed close, arm looped around the back of the seat,

leaning across to look out of the window, grabbing a hold of his hand to get his attention. Only that wouldn't be happening now, because Drew-or-Don-or-David or whatever had already sat next to Harrington at the back of the bus before Billy'd gotten there. So he'd huffed, told the others to fuck themselves when they'd said hello, and gone to sit somewhere around the middle of the bus by himself. Fifteen minutes in he'd realised he was being a pussy and he could sit wherever the fuck he wanted, the fucking shitty team he'd carried through the season owed him whatever the fuck he liked. He was just about to go and tell the guy sitting with Harrington to fuck off, but goddamn Tommy of all people beat him to it. Billy was on alert the second Tommy swaggered over to Harrington. He had good fucking reason to be, after the time in the parking lot when Tommy had been a fucking bitch and gotten all up in Harrington's face, and Billy'd had to discount-Slurpee him to remind him where he stood.

Don't you touch him, asshole.

But he didn't. He just sat down, started talking. Billy might have preferred if Tommy *had* started something, then he would have had an excuse to jump in, bare his teeth a little bit, assert himself. As it was, he wasn't going to crawl over there on his belly, clamouring for their attention when he clearly wasn't wanted. Not that it had ever stopped him before.

"Hey man," Drew-or-Don shuffled past him down the aisle.

"Fuck off," Billy said listlessly. He was one of the few who hadn't come crawling to Billy the second he'd walked into school, but he wasn't hostile either, and he'd never been sure how to deal with indifference.

"The fuck crawled up your ass, Hargrove?" he said, followed Billy's gaze to where Harrington and Tommy were sitting at the back of the bus. "Just let them talk man," he rolled his eyes, "They'll be fine. They've got a lot of shit they need to sort out, and I need a break from their bullshit."

Billy looked up at him, enunciating every word carefully so the idiot got the message. "I said, fuck off."

"God, fine," he glared and made his way down to the rest of the team, "whatever, man."

It spoke volumes about how much Steve had affected him that Billy didn't rush over there to interrupt them purely on principle after being told not to. Fine, maybe he and Tommy did have shit to sort out, and maybe Billy sort of knew that, after hearing them both whine about it. Didn't mean he had to like it.

So he sat and sulked, totally thrown off his game, and watched Tommy and Harrington talk, all serious. He wondered if they were making up. Cute. Not. Worst of all was the stupid, niggling feeling that the two of them would suddenly be best friends again and it'd be bye bye Billy. He wanted to fucking punch the head rest right off the seat in front of him. He didn't. But then he heard Harrington laugh, and his attention snapped back over to them. Tommy had made Steve *laugh*, made him smile that surprised, pleased, mouth-half-open and lopsided happy smile, the fucking dork, and Billy felt... icky. Hot and jealous and curdling in the pit of his stomach, purple clouds heavy with rain and lightning about to split the sky. He saw Steve see him, smile dropping away at Billy's expression, wasn't sure if he felt better or worse. One thing he was sure of though, he was going to play like shit.

#

He'd played like shit. They'd still won though, just about, because even on a shit day, Billy was good. And with Harrington and Tommy getting along, they played a little better together. Fucking *lovely*. Also Northern's line up for the season was genuinely awful, so. He didn't bother showering, preferred to spend the journey home tacky with half-dried sweat up his back than shower with the rest of the team, loud and buoyant with their success, and too close to Steve Harrington's soaped up shoulders. But he still hadn't managed to stop himself shoulder checking Harrington on his way back into the locker room after the game, from telling he and Tommy how cosy they'd looked on the court, and how nice it must be for the king to have his right hand man back again. He fucking hated himself for it. But they obviously didn't need him anymore and it was fine. It was *fine*.

Except it wasn't, and apparently that was obvious, because

Harrington was behind him two seconds later, pawing at him to turn around. Steve's fingers on Billy's back gave him the same jolting shock as accidentally stepping in an icy puddle on the sidewalk, and he jerked away.

"Fuck off."

"Hargrove?" his voice was full of concern that Billy didn't want, made his teeth clench and fingers curl tight. "Come on man, what's the problem?"

"Leave me alone Harrington," Billy said through his teeth, "I'm warning you."

"Billy," he said, softer, quiet enough that the rest of the guys wouldn't hear, and Billy could practically feel them trying to eavesdrop. "Come on, just tell me - "

Billy finally turned around, and he really couldn't deal with Steve right now; sweaty hair in his eyes and face pink, eyes bright and shirt off halfway through changing and Billy wanted to fucking devour him, but he couldn't and it fucking *hurt*. Wanted to fall into him, let him hug him close and warm and tell him it was alright, kinda fucking hated himself for that, too. "I'm just having a shitty day Harrington okay?" he prayed Steve knew him well enough by now that that was enough for him to take the hint, that he needed space, as much as he didn't want it, not from him. "Just don't - touch me." Steve lowered his hand but didn't move back, if anything, he swayed a little closer. "Please. Please Steve, don't."

To Steve's credit, he did back off then, though it didn't much look like he wanted to, respecting what Billy asked of him. "Okay. Will you - " he blew out a long breath. "We can hang out later, if you want?"

"I - " *I can't*. "Not today."

Harrington just nodded, smiled sadly, and grabbed his stuff to head back to the bus.

#

Only Max was home when Billy got back. That was okay. Once, it

might have only made him feel worse, knowing she was around while he was trying to feel like shit in peace. Now, he was mostly just grateful it wasn't his dad home. Probably would've have gotten into it again if he were, purely to distract himself. There were certain patterns in Neil's behaviour that he could predict, and Billy assumed that, after Susan having to witness him yelling at Billy and smacking him around again after he'd promised her he'd stop for the fiftieth time, he'd felt like he needed to take her out to make up for it. Max confirmed his suspicions when he walked into the kitchen, still in his sweaty basketball things, and bag slung over his shoulder.

"They've gone for diner and a movie," she hollered when she heard him come in, back to him and screwing the lid back onto the peanut butter.

He grunted, irritated that she'd known exactly what was going through his head - he might as well have projected it onto the goddamn wall - and would know the extent of his relief. She turned around, licking jelly off her thumb. "What happened to you?"

"Fuck off Maxine."

"You look like someone died." Oh, for the days when she was too afraid to so much as look at him funny. She frowned. "Did you lose?"

"No," he said, started digging to the back of the cupboard to find something to drink. He fucking needed it. "We won."

"Then why're you so pissy?"

"None of your fucking business Maxine, Jesus."

"Fine," she said, glaring at him over the top of her sandwich. Then, more quietly, eyes aimed at the floor, "thought you might want to talk about it." He scowled, but she pressed on before he could say anything. "You don't have to, asshole, I just... know it helps you? Sometimes."

Fuck. Fuck her for knowing him so well, and fuck himself for letting it happen. "I didn't ask you to be my goddamn agony aunt, okay shithead?" For fucks sake. Hating her was easier.

"Is it Steve?"

"What?" he turned to look at her, afraid of how his voice sounded so small and surprised, none of the bark or bite he usually kept for when she stuck her nose where she shouldn't. "Why'd you say that?" How could she possibly know? Sure, she'd sort of known about Antonio, but he and Steve hadn't even - they weren't -

"God, don't bust a blood vessel over it," she said. His confusion and panic must have shown on his face - when had he gotten so shit at hiding stuff from her? Probably around the same time she'd stuffed a carton of blatantly lifted smokes under his door a few months back, along with a note - *I don't want to hate you*. Probably around the time he'd decided he didn't want to hate her anymore either. Didn't mean she still couldn't piss him off something fierce. "I just - there's only like, a few things you get *real* moody over now."

"I beg your fucking pardon?"

She went a little pink, took a big angry bite of her sandwich. "It's true."

He grimaced at the sight of smushed up peanut butter as she spoke around her mouthful of food. "Real lady like Maxine. Fucking charming. Now I see why Sinclair likes you so much."

"Screw you," she said, face even redder. She swallowed. "You wanna know how I know, or what?"

"No." He did.

"It can't be the game, because you won. I don't think it's your dad, because you - " she hesitated, pushed on, "because you're probably so relieved he's not here right now, that you don't care about fighting with him earlier anymore."

That was too close to the mark for his liking. "What the - "

"Oh, and you're not hungover, and your car's not broken," she quickly cut him off, the little shit. "So it must be Steve. Did you guys fall out or something? You're like, best friends now, right? I didn't think you bothered with friends."

"I - " he was so wrong-footed by the realisation that she thought it was about their being friends and not how much Billy wanted to stick his tongue down Harrington's throat and tell him he was pretty, that he wasn't sure if he was mad or relieved. It fucked with his head and he ended up giving her an answer more sincere than he would've liked. "He's started hanging out with Tommy again," he admitted, throat tight as he forced the words out. "I don't like it."

"Oh." Max brightened, like that was no fucking problem at all and didn't make Billy want to break shit. "That's easy. Tommy's an asshole, Steve likes you more."

Billy was pretty sure he was more of an asshole than Tommy, and that Max had never actually met him, but her confidence in him was oddly reassuring. "Whatever," he mumbled into the depth of the cupboard, "didn't fuckin' ask for your opinion." He found the flask of cheap shit he'd stashed behind the flour for emergencies. His dad'd never bother looking there. He searched Billy's room sometimes, but he wouldn't think to look through Susan's rarely used baking shit. "You need a ride anywhere later?" Not that he cared but he didn't want to get super fucked if she did.

"No," she said, crumbs on her chin, "Will's brother's going to pick me up."

"Right, of course he is." Billy grabbed the flask and went to his room.

He lay on his bed, sprawled out and facing the window. The sun was low, the sky soft and peachy like he could sink right into it, sun-edged clouds too bright to look at straight on. He'd only had a few mouthfuls from the flask, but he hadn't really eaten much or drunk enough through the day, and he felt all fuzzy around the edges. Softer, lighter, and dimly embarrassed about it. Which was why he'd been careful not to let himself drink too much around Harrington lately - worried he might give in to the urge to collapse on him, curl into his chest and refuse to move.

Half tipsy as he was, numbed and heightened all at once, he gave up, and let himself think about Steve. Nothing in particular, nothing solid, just a pleasant blur of his soft eyes, dumb smile, the happy quirk in his voice when he whispered something stupid to Billy at the

back of class, his laugh, the freckles on his neck. How when they sat close, Billy was keenly aware of the weight of him, warm heaviness of his body inches away, long fingers flicking that lighter he barely ever used open and closed again. He set the flask aside and settled back on his sheets, propped up a little with his head on the thin pillow, watched the slowly darkening sky. He lifted his arm to rub at the back of his neck, easing out the tightness he'd put there being so tense all afternoon. As he did so, his other hand moved over his body, touching without any real intent, just comforting, careful strokes over his upper arm, his chest, catching briefly on his hip. It was nice, soothing.

It occurred to him then that if he wanted to keep Steve, as a friend even, he'd need to try and give a little more and take a little less. It went against pretty much every other facet of himself, but he was willing, if it meant he got to be around him just a little longer. He'd need to let some shit go as a part of the compromise; like that Steve was apparently okay with Tommy again, and that he'd probably never have him like he wanted. But that might be okay. Billy'd be halfway happy as long as Steve was there in any context, which was more than he'd ever expected of himself.

Notes for the Chapter:

Next time: They got to a party. Will Steve get his guy?

10. And I Drink A Lot

Notes for the Chapter:

Please bear the Steve/OMC tag in mind for this one guys. Also the tag 'idiots' seems pretty relevant.

Billy was being weird. Or, not weird exactly. He was himself, just... *more*. Almost unnaturally happy, like how he got sometimes about four beers in and something really tickled him. All big smiles, laughing, metaphorical clouds parted and sun shining, overly tactile and teasing. He'd been kind of giddy all afternoon, and although it was hardly a problem - it was sort of nice - Steve had to wonder what it was that had gotten him so cheery. It didn't feel quite like Billy if he wasn't a little pissy over something, or at least making a point of pretending to be. But that thought wasn't enough to stop his stomach fluttering every time Billy grabbed a hold of his forearm to get his attention, or steer him towards where he wanted to go. His skin felt tingly with the empty space each time he pulled away again. Perhaps Tommy'd been right and given him some actually helpful advice - a foreign concept, but hey everyone had their moments - and he needed to hook up with another guy to get him the hell over wanting Billy so much. If he was incredibly lucky, maybe at the party later. Doubtful, but he'd give it a shot, just to feel slightly less in love with his straight as an arrow, skirt-chasing, girl magnet best friend. And even that, calling Billy Hargrove his best friend after having his face caved in by him a few months ago, was a fucking twist he hadn't seen coming. Never mind the rest of it.

"Hurry the hell up Harrington, Max said this movie's pretty kick ass," he said, calloused fingers once again just below the thin skin of Steve's inner elbow as he dragged him insistently towards the movie theatre.

"Yeah I know," Steve mumbled, looking at the shallow divots on his forearm where Billy's fingertips pressed into it, "I took 'em all to see it last week, remember?"

Billy popped his gum and grinned, kept right on chewing it open-mouthed and kinda gross, through his smile. "Yeah, and I vividly

remember *not being there*," he said. "Come on baby, we got hours before the party." His voice was pitched a little higher, pouty and so obviously just teasing him, but that didn't stop Steve from getting a little hot over it, face pink and tripping over his own feet. He hadn't known just how much he'd wanted Billy to call him baby until he'd heard it out loud. Some of the mess of emotions he was struggling not to drown in must have shown on his face, because Billy dropped his arm like he'd been burned, sunny grin falling into something pale and slackened before he pasted a brittle smile back on top.

"Come on pretty boy," he pulled back to slug Steve on the shoulder, "I'm just messin' with you." But he didn't quite meet Steve's eye as he led the way to the ticket booth. "I'll even let you pay, if you're lucky."

Knocked speechless, Steve paid for them both and they went in.

Thank fuck he'd already seen the movie, because he really couldn't pay attention. There was about a foot of space between them, including the ratty faux velvet arm rest, but Steve could feel him, kept sliding his gaze across to watch Billy watch the screen. He'd taken his gum out and stuck it under a chair, had his necklace in his mouth now instead. If it weren't for the movie playing, Steve would have been able to hear the metal on his teeth. *Did he always have to have something in his mouth, Jesus.* He looked... fucking beautiful to be honest, light from the screen catching his hair, eyes, glint of the pendant between his teeth, and Steve wanted all over again. But if Billy was so obviously uncomfortable when they were only joking about it, the fuck would he think if he knew how much Steve wanted him *not* to be joking?

#

The party put Steve in a good mood. Largely because it wasn't the same old faces - Tommy had been right in saying kids from the teams at Northern and Hillside would show up, along with friends and girlfriends, and there were a lot more faces than the usual parties. It was nice. He felt less trapped, maybe, less stuck. Like this party wasn't just a rehash of all the ones before it. Nance and Jonathan even put in an appearance, which he felt better about than he thought he would, and he talked with them a while before the beers began to kick in, and the raucous laughter from the corner where

most of the Hawkins team had gathered sounded like more of a good time. So he told the two of them he'd catch them later, and went to join the guys.

Most of them seemed a few drinks ahead of Steve, were doing shots of something nasty that he couldn't read the name of but remembered the label, knew he'd had before at some shitty party or another. A guy he thought he recognised from Hillside's team was looking at him, held out the bottle of whatever it was to him as he settled into the circle. Steve smiled, and took it.

"Hey Stevie," Tommy slapped a hand down on his shoulder, wobbly already, eyes a little glazed. "Can I have a word? Like, without these idiots listening in?"

"Sure," Steve handed the bottle back, feeling a little more wobbly himself when he stood up, and amid protests from the team at being called idiots, the two of them moved a little way off to a quieter part of the room. "What's up?"

"I've missed this, man," Tommy said, waving his can between them, sloshing beer on the carpet, "the two of us hanging out at parties like we used to."

"You're drunk," Steve said, but he was smiling. Wasn't like he was sober either.

"Yeah," Tommy grinned. "Doesn't mean I don't mean it, Stevie."

Steve snorted. "You're an idiot."

"Probably," Tommy raised his beer in a toast. Steve smacked him on the shoulder and copied, the two of them downing what was left of their cans. Steve felt brilliant, light and clear, which was probably mostly just the drink talking, but for now he felt good. He'd take it.

Then Billy was stomping past them, and Steve was so stupidly happy to see him, he reached out to sling an arm around his shoulder. To his confusion, Billy just scowled and shrugged him off before disappearing into another room. Steve was upset about it for all of half a minute, happy and buzzed enough that it didn't kill his mood at all, and went back to chatting shit with Tommy.

A little while later though, and it occurred to Steve that actually no, he wasn't happy about Billy brushing him off like that. He wanted to hang with his best friend at a party, what was so hard about that? He enjoyed hanging with him. And yeah, he was meant to be using the party to hang with people who were definitely not Billy, and if he was very lucky find a guy who was definitely not Billy to get his crush on him out of his system. But he was his best fucking friend, right? And he'd looked upset, and Steve hadn't liked it. So he went to look for him. It was like he'd vanished though; he wasn't in any of the rooms Steve poked his head into. He couldn't see him outside either, when he eventually thought to check. Guessing he must have not looked hard enough in the house, he turned to go back in, and nearly crashed right into someone. For one blurry moment, he thought by some odd twist of luck it might've been Billy. But it wasn't. It was the guy from Hillside who'd handed him the bottle across the circle earlier on.

"Shit, sorry," he said, righting himself and smiling in automatic politeness, though probably a bit more sloppily than his mom had attempted to train into him.

"No harm done," the guy returned his smile, rubbing at his arm where Steve had banged into it. "You wanna um, hang out here for a bit? That shitty booze has started to hit, I could do with some air."

Steve shrugged. It wasn't like he was having much luck finding Billy, could probably do with clearing his head a little too. "Okay."

They stood around in the back yard a little while, went through the usual kind of stuff Steve might talk about with other guys; school and basketball and whatever. They'd played against each other a few times before, Steve sort of remembered him from half a dozen scuffles on the court, and they knew a lot of the same people, liked the same stuff. It was easy to talk to the guy. Ethan, was his name. He'd been to summer camp with Steve's second cousin, he smelt mostly of booze and a little like the incense burning phase his mom had gone through a few winters back, and he had big arms. And as the talk grew easier, the party inside the house louder, Steve found himself focusing more and more on that last part.

Halfway down the yard, there was a fountain, big and white and kind of ugly, the sort of thing Steve's Aunt Val might have put in her back

yard. They'd stopped there to talk a while, Steve leaning against the edge and Ethan standing right next to him. He was looking at Steve all intense while he talked, the back of his hand pressed up on Steve's leg they were standing that close. He could feel the bumps of his knuckles on his thigh through the denim, it was all he could think about as Ethan spoke, Steve's eye following the pull and curve of his mouth. So Steve did the thing that made the most sense to him at the moment; feeling buzzed and happy, the feel of the other boy standing so close, the way he was looking at Steve and Steve's promise to himself to find someone that wasn't Billy... he kissed him. He pulled away again before he'd even tasted the shitty booze on his lips.

Ethan blinked at Steve once he'd moved back, dark eyes wide and mouth dropped open. "Shit."

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Steve was back peddling immediately, wondering if he was about to get punched. He seemed to wonder that a lot, maybe he needed a less volatile circle of friends. Or maybe just to rethink some of the decisions he made. Like laying one on some random dude because they'd talked about basketball for fifteen minutes and he missed Billy. "Look, I just - I'm going through a - why are you smiling?" God, he was definitely going to get punched.

"No, it's okay," Ethan laughed, actually looked sort of pleased, flushed in the dark, rubbed at the back of his neck, "it's just, Tommy H was dropping hints all over the place that someone on the Hawkins team liked guys too, but I just. I didn't think I'd strike lucky and it'd be you. King Steve."

Something not quite so nice twisted through Steve's gut at the nickname he only heard from one person, these days. "Oh. You mean you - "

"Uhuh."

"So... you're not gunna to clock me?" Dumb question maybe, but hey, he wanted to be sure.

Ethan laughed again, low and easy, closed the gap Steve had put between them. "Uh, no. No, I'm not gunna hit you, man. Last thing I wanna do, actually."

"Oh," Steve said again, feeling a little thrilled, a little stupid, a little relieved. Forcibly shoved Billy Hargrove out of his head. "Then can I - y'know. Is it okay if I kiss you again?" The first one had been nice, if a bit brief, and he wanted to do it some more. "Properly, I mean. I didn't really - that last one wasn't my best work."

"I'd like that," Ethan said, winked, "find out if the rumours about you are true. But maybe over there?" he jerked his head at the tall trees lining the bottom of the yard, hidden from the house.

"Shit. Yeah." In all the... everything, he'd been struck a little dumb, forgotten that even if Ethan didn't punch Steve for kissing him, someone else probably would.

"C'mon then," Ethan smiled at him, and started across the lawn.

"Dick!" Steve said loudly, halfway across the grass as a thought slowed up by the beers and one fleeting kiss suddenly occurred to him.

"What?" Ethan raised an eyebrow at him, shot a worried glance up towards the house.

"Sorry," Steve said, smiling sheepishly as Ethan bit back laughter. "It's just that Tommy said he wouldn't tell anyone, that fucker."

Ethan shook his head, light from the house catching his dark curls and the broad slant of his forehead as he laughed, and it hit Steve properly then how good looking he was, not just a wayward thought about his thick arms or nice butt. "Technically, he didn't tell. He never said it was you, or anyone, outright. Just hinted that someone on the team might be looking to hook up with a dude. And he looked pretty pissed with himself after he let it slip, too."

"Hm." Steve was a little mad at him for letting it slip, intentional or not. If the wrong person found out about it, he was more than fucked. But it was hard to hold onto it when he was happy-tipsy, and this... *cute* guy wanted to kiss him some more. They were in the trees now, all quiet, muffled shadow, well out of sight of the house. Steve knew he could be smooth when he wanted to be, beers or not, girl or boy apparently, so he closed the gap between them, watched Ethan's

smile flutter when their hips met. Steve raised a hand, a practised move, to place it gently on the back of his neck just under his ear, fingers brushing his hair.

They kissed, and it was *good*, and Steve didn't know why exactly he'd expected it to be so different from kissing a girl, like it should have been some big moment. Sure - Ethan was taller than a lot of girls, had a little stubble, tasted like crappy booze instead of over sweet punch and lipstick, but it was just another set of lips. Not to say that it wasn't nice, he was only human after all, but it wasn't exactly the heart shifting thing he'd sorta been expecting. Still, Steve liked kissing, was good at it even, and so was Ethan, and it wasn't long before Steve felt that familiar hot, heavy, tug low in his belly. He pushed a little further into Ethan's space, heating things up a little, and oh boy, that was interesting. He gripped at Ethan's hips, perhaps a bit too hard, and Ethan gave him just the same right back. Then they were pawing at each other, kissing harder and laughing, short of breath, into each other's mouths. And yeah okay, the uh... landmarks? might have been a little different, but hooking up was still familiar enough territory.

Even so, he still found himself thinking about Billy. Which really shouldn't have been a surprise. He thought about tangling his fingers in Billy's curls as he ran his hand through Ethan's short hair. Thought of his tight jeans as Ethan palmed at his ass, Billy's pink mouth as he sucked on Ethan's lip. A little while before he'd asked out Nance, before he was sure she liked him back even, he used to think about her when he hooked up with other girls. Not the whole time; soon enough his other senses would kick in and he'd get lost in the taste, smell, feel, of whoever it was in the back of his car. But just before things started to get good, he'd inevitably start thinking of her big eyes, her slender frame, wondered how the flutter of her pulse would feel under his tongue as he kissed her neck. But even though he'd known he shouldn't have been doing it, he'd never actively tried to push thoughts of Nancy Wheeler away. With Billy Hargrove, he made the effort.

And soon enough it worked. He lost all thought entirely in the insistent press of lips, hard chest under his hands, fingers tugging at his belt buckle. He was barely thinking at all as he slipped his hand into the front of Ethan's pants, driven by the need to touch, be

touched, get whoever his partner may be off and leave them feeling good. It was what he was good at. And the groan Ethan let out at the stroke of his hand as Steve kissed at his panting mouth was a flattering confirmation. Even better was the returned grab at the front of his jeans, harder than girls dared.

"Shit," he breathed, twitched up into Ethan's hand.

"You okay, or - ?"

"Yeah, yeah," Steve said, "I just - I need you to touch me."

"Yessir," he felt Ethan laugh into another, softer kiss before popping Steve's jeans open. He eased his hands into Steve's underwear and took hold of him, hot and a little too dry, but fucking fantastic.

Cliche as it sounded, it was a bit of a blur after that - Steve had a habit of losing himself to sensation when he was having sex, chasing whatever felt good, resurfacing to ensure his girl, or in this case guy, was having a good time before drowning in it again. They bit, licked, at each other's lips, breathed hard at the same air, groaning as they desperately jerked each other off, the smell of crushed grass under their feet. It was a feeling familiar and foreign all at once. They came, hot and rushing and sticky, then laughing and breathless as they made a bad job of cleaning up and tucking themselves back in. Ethan gave him one last kiss and a grin before he went.

"I hate to cut and run, but my ride home'll be waiting for me," he said, eyes soft and smiling and blissed out. "I guess I'll catch you next basketball season?"

"Sure," Steve couldn't pretend he wasn't relieved at that - relieved that Ethan saw it as a one time hook up too. Not that he wasn't nice - and gave a hell of a good hand job - but he really wasn't ready for anything more than that. And wasn't quite ready to forget Billy either, as futile as waiting on that whole mess might've been. Looked like his plan to get his best fried out of his head had backfired.

But still, he went back into the party smiling, and didn't see the lone figure smoking behind a rosebush.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well shit. Spoilers - yes that was Billy who saw them.

This was a thing I planned on happening from the start, mostly because I just wanted Billy to find out about Steve being into into guys first, rather than the other way around.

11. Drinking Only Wakes You Up at Ten

Notes for the Chapter:

A short one, the party from Billy's PoV. As you probably guessed, a little warning for accidental voyeurism ahead. Also some Billy/OFC, in which he's predictably a bit of a ass.

The party was fine. To be honest, Billy wasn't in the mood - after spending the afternoon alone with Steve, everyone else just rubbed him the wrong way - but the fact that there were kids from two other schools there made it feel like enough of a change of scene to gee him up a bit. Harrington looked good too; wearing yet another pale, striped polo from his apparently fuckin' endless collection, that rode up when he leant forward to pick up a beer. He was sitting with Wheeler and Byers, which made Billy feel odd and twitchy, but he seemed happy enough slumped between them, talking animatedly, getting pinker in the face with each drink. Billy sorta wanted to grab him, haul him up into his lap and curl his hands into that shirt, bite soft at his neck a little bit and shoot glares at everyone else until they left them alone. But he couldn't do that. He'd already fucking slipped up and called him baby at the movies.

His decision to try to be... less shitty, for Steve had left him feeling pretty good, riding high, for a few days. Earlier on when they'd gone into town, he'd felt all stupid-happy, giddy, relieved that he'd decided on something, and it had maybe seeped through a little bit. Steve kept looking at him funny. But he'd felt so good he hadn't cared. Until his own fucking loose mouth, loose heart, had betrayed him, that was.

So yeah, he couldn't do that. He turned his back on Steve all cosied up with his ex and her freaky boyfriend, and went to join the rest of the basketball team. He drank what was offered, smirked or nodded or swore when it was expected, and they were all fuckin' idiots, but it was fine. It was comfortable territory, and he was starting to feel a little looser, less knotted up. Until Harrington came to join them, because of course he did. Part of Billy leapt at the sight of him, but another part didn't trust himself to be around him when the pair of

them had been drinking; didn't trust himself not to try something stupid, and didn't altogether trust Steve to stop him if he did. To let Billy get on with it out of surprise and sympathy and one too many beers, only to laugh it off as an accident in the morning. He didn't think he could deal with that. But he didn't have to worry on it for long though, because Tommy H was whispering to Harrington and then the two of them were moving off, talking all secretive, heads close. The sight of them being all pally like they'd been on the bus left Billy feeling displaced, sour taste in his mouth, and despite his promise to himself to let it go, it pissed him off to the extent that he needed to get out, and barged past them in the direction of anywhere that wasn't the sitting room.

But Steve wasn't fucking having it apparently, and took the mere sight of him as an invitation - though really, why shouldn't he, they were *best fuckin' friends* after all - to sling an arm around him. And Billy definitely didn't trust himself for that kind of closeness with the odd mood he was in and the booze he'd knocked back. The smell of him, cheap drink and expensive cologne and fabric softener and the inside of his car, the weight of him tucked up against Billy's side... So he glared and shoved him off, hoped Steve would get the message, wouldn't remember him being a dick to him the next day, and stalked off into the kitchen to find a girl to mess around with, a chance to get himself back on even ground.

"Hi Billy."

He found one in Cindy, a chick he knew he'd flirted with once or twice before in the lunch line, and was pretty sure had tried it on with him at a couple of parties. Couldn't be sure about that though, since he'd probably been blitzed and most of the girls looked kinda similar after a drink or five.

"Hey girly," he knew an easy shot when he saw one, and switched on the charm. "You havin' a good time?"

"Mhmm," she hummed, slid a little closer so she was all pressed up along his side, arms pushing her tits together. He guessed it was a practised move on her part, though he honestly couldn't give less of a shit about what was under her shirt. But it was a promising start; if she was practically climbing up him already, he wouldn't have to put

much work in to get what he wanted. "You looked a little lonely," she blinked slowly up at him, "I thought I'd come say hello."

"Is that so?" he said, let his bottom lip pout out a bit, saw her eyes drop to his mouth, tried not to think about how Steve would be rolling his eyes at him if he were there. "Well, I'm very glad you did, sweetheart."

She laughed, thin and hitching, leaned a little heavier against him. She smelt of cigarettes and sugary booze and a perfume so thick it caught in his throat. He shifted slightly so his thigh slipped between hers, and her breath stuttered at the touch of the denim on her bare legs. Perfect. "Billy - "

"How about we find somewhere quieter to... talk," he said, lowering his voice to that perfect mix of rough and tender that drove chicks wild. "I'd really like to get - "

"Cindy!" a girl with a side ponytail and smudged lipstick burst into their corner of the kitchen, stopped short and frowned when she saw Billy's hand on Cindy's hip.

"Hey Joanne," Cindy slurred just a little, pushed closer into Billy's grip, "what's up?"

"Debbie's locked herself my parents' bathroom," she said.

Cindy scrunched up her nose. "What? Why?"

"We were playing truth or dare, and Mark said Carol had a nicer butt than her."

Billy rolled his eyes. Jesus.

"Crap. Is she okay?"

"No, she's crying and won't let me in," Joanne sighed. "I need you to come help me talk her into opening the door."

And just like that, Billy's chance of getting his dick sucked stumbled out of the kitchen without a backward glance to go soothe her drunk friend's pride. For fuck's sake.

He needed a minute to rein himself in back under control, to not be mad at Cindy, her friend with the shit hair, at fucking Debbie for locking herself in the bathroom. To not be angry at Steve for drinking and being all over him, at himself for drinking and not being able to handle it. He felt himself rolling towards a storm again, to cracking and smacking some random guy who he decided had looked at him funny. He tried to keep himself together, went outside for a smoke before he put his fist through a wall, or someone's face.

He stood by the back door as he lit up, took that first shaky inhale, the deep breath and familiar rush of smoke settling him a little. But when he realised he could be easily seen from inside the house, he wandered further into the backyard. The last fucking thing he needed was Steve spotting him through a window and deciding to come out and check he was okay before he'd had a chance to sober up a bit. No matter how much he might've wanted him to.

It was while he was sulking behind some rosebushes, thinking how pathetic that was and wondering if he should just cut his losses and go home, that he heard it. The unmistakable, wet sound of people making out. Which only got him irritated all over again, because for fuck's sake. He was deliberating whether butting in and making whoever'd snuck outside to suck face jump would be funny or just plain fucking creepy, when he heard one of them speak.

"Shit."

He couldn't place the voice right away. He knew he knew them, but literally everyone he went to school with was at the party, so that was a fucking no brainer. And it was only a single word to work with, hoarse and quiet, cracked in the middle.

"You okay, or - ?"

Wait, that was definitely a guy. And unless his ears were somehow fucked or he'd drunk more than he'd thought, so was the first voice. Two guys were hooking up in the backyard, and Billy didn't know how he felt about it. A little bit outraged, because they got to and he didn't. Envious, that they'd been brave enough and he wasn't, and that neither of them had been dumb enough to fall for their straight friend. Once he'd gotten over the shock, the thought of it left him a little turned on too. But mostly, thanks to the beers and his inability

to mind his own business, finding out who the fuck it was seemed like the most important thing in the world. He edged a little closer, kept his breathing shallow and quiet, treading careful through the bushes.

"Yeah, yeah," said the first guy, and *oh shit*. "I just need you to touch me."

Steve. That was *Steve*. He just about managed to stop himself loudly swearing, from straight up barreling over there and... doing something, ripping them apart or punching the other guy's lights out. He was torn between the curiosity telling him to stay, or getting the fuck out of there before he saw something he didn't want to. Too shocked still to feel weird about it, he kept looking through the leaves, squinting in the dim light until he spotted the two boys hiding in the gloom under the trees.

"Yessir."

Just in time to see some guy - Billy thought he he might have been on Hillside's basket ball team - shove his hand down the front of Steve's pants.

Billy didn't think he'd had such a mixed or confusing reaction to something since he'd realised that he liked boys and that apparently that wasn't okay with a lot of people. The first and strongest feeling to hit him like a punch to the gut, enough to knock any other misgivings out for the count, was arousal. The sight of Steve tipping his head back, mouth dropped open in pleasure at the feeling of the other guy's hand on his dick. There was anger, hot crackling jealousy, that whoever the fuck this asshole was was the one with his hands on Steve, not him. And feeling stupid, so, so stupid, because apparently Steve had been absolutely fucking fine about the concept of necking with dudes the whole time, and Billy'd been too up his own ass and feeling sorry for himself to realise. Idiot.

Steve looked like he was struggling to keep quiet, was chewing on his own bottom lip to stop himself gasping out, the odd groan seeping through from the back of his throat, a muffled curse Billy was too far away to hear properly. Billy wanted to hear him, wanted to kiss his mouth open, drink in every hitch in his breath and every sound that

fell from his lips. Steve must have been having similar thoughts, because he pushed forward into the other guy's space, kissing him messy and desperate. But it was when Steve opened up the other guy's pants that Billy really knew he was in trouble. The slackness of Steve's panting mouth, eyes big and glazed as he got his hand around his cock, was enough fuel for Billy's fantasies for a decade. He was weak enough to give into the terrible, teasing thought of 'what if that was me,' pictured Steve looking up at him in wonder like that as he got his big hand around Billy's dick. He half wished it wasn't so dark, so he could see the blotchy pink he knew would have seeped up Steve's neck and across his cheeks. But then, if it weren't dark, none of it would be happening at all. Didn't stop him wishing it was him with Steve fingers squeezing frantically at his ass though.

He kept watching, even though it fucking hurt and he knew it was the height of his fucking pathetic crush on his friend, because he looked so fucking *good*. More solid too, animated, veil of murky water he still hid behind sometimes fallen away. It was only what Billy felt for him - God what a sap - that made him feel the tiniest bit bad about watching, but really, who was he kidding. He had no fucking morals anyway, and they shouldn't have been doing that shit somewhere so public if they didn't want to get caught. One thing he did know, was that he wouldn't even consider telling anyone at the party. Even if he'd still hated Steve, and was offered up the chance to bring his reputation plummeting further down, he wouldn't have. The thought of 'what if it was me caught out like that,' and the consequences, filled him with enough cold dread that he wouldn't wish it on anyone. He also got a bit of a kick out of having that secret piece of Harrington to himself. Or almost. Which sounded really fucking creepy, actually. Maybe he'd have to re-evaluate that when he was sober.

He managed to stop being such a pathetic piece of shit just in time to hear Harrington suck in a breath, to see his eyes scrunch closed and hips rock up in short, unbalanced bursts into the other guy's fist. Billy got sort of stuck on that. He didn't look away as they cleaned up, watched as Steve smiled bashfully and tucked his soft dick back into his pants.

"I hate to cut and run, but my ride home'll be - "

The rest of the words they exchanged were made inaudible when a huge round of cheering and yelling burst from the house behind them, and he spared a second to turn and glare at the dark windows. He couldn't go home or back inside until his dick had calmed down, so he lit another cigarette to wait it out, focused on how shitty the whole thing had made him feel instead of how good Steve had looked.

Notes for the Chapter:

And that didn't move the plot on at all. I split this and the next chapter in two, because they were weird together.

Also sorry I've been a bit pants at comments the last couple of chapters - usually I like to reply, but the last few weeks have been a lot. Thanks though, if you've commented so far :)

12. You've Got Time to Grow

Notes for the Chapter:

Only a little one, because it originally went together with the part before. So also more Billiam.

Billy was feeling shitty. That itself was nothing new, he expected to feel terrible the day after a party; if he emerged the other side feeling fine, then it was only a testament to how much that party must have sucked. It was different though. It wasn't the 'I drank five beers, downed a keg and a crappy bottle of whiskey and I think my head's going to fall off' kind of terrible. No, it was worse than that. It was 'I want to fuck my best friend I thought was straight, but caught him getting jerked off by his secret boyfriend, and now I've missed my chance and he'll never love me back' kind of terrible. So yeah, he wasn't feeling so hot.

He was meant to be meeting Steve at the quarry that evening for the usual post-party ritual they'd fallen into since becoming friends - have a beer or two to take the edge off the hangover, and argue over who'd made a bigger idiot of themselves the night before. It was usually Steve - Billy did some dumb shit, he knew that, but he somehow managed to carry it off better than Steve did. He'd throw in a bit of swagger and a wink to distract them all, and came out looking a hell of a lot less dorky than Harrington did. This time though, he wasn't sure he fancied it.

The shock of what he'd seen last night had well and truly passed, and had mostly just left him feeling mad. Really fucking mad, actually. It was the sort of shit the Billy of six months ago would have ripped people apart over. And alright, he still was pretty tempted to go sniff out that guy from Hillside who'd been privileged enough to get into Steve's pants and fuck him up a bit on principle. He wasn't going to though. Because Steve had him by the balls, whether he knew it or not, and he wasn't going to risk pushing him away by getting into a fight with some guy who - as much as Billy didn't want to think about it - Harrington cared about. He guessed it came under the whole 'trying to be less of an asshole for Steve' thing again. Which meant he'd have to pull up his panties and get the hell over it, because he

wasn't about to lose Steve, no matter much seeing him with another guy made him feel like total crap. Which also meant that he had to go and see him as planned. *Shit.*

He grabbed his keys before he could change his mind.

#

Steve was already there when Billy pulled up to their normal parking spot, half under a row of straggly pines above a steep drop to the water. Billy's dad was away in Indianapolis for the weekend - something to do with work that he wouldn't stop bitching about - so Billy'd been in less of a rush than usual to get out of the house, it being Neil-free. He'd actually enjoyed spending the day sprawled on the sofa with Maxine, watching cartoons and flicking cereal at each other, distracting himself from everything else. Reason number two for him being a little late was that he still had no idea what the fuck he was meant to say to Steve about any of it. Still wasn't sure if he should say anything to Steve about it at all, if he should even acknowledge it. Which he wasn't used to - Billy was very much of the opinion that if something bothered you, you should air it out, and fuck everyone else getting twisted up over it. Only this time he actually cared about the person who'd get twisted up. Fuck dammit, Steve Harrington.

And there he was, leaning up against the Beemer and looking out over the quarry. The sky was purplish behind him and darkening quickly, the odd star peeking out above the thickness of the trees. Shit, he was later than he'd meant to be. he parked up next to him.

"Hey man," Steve turned his head to watch him as he got out of the Camaro, smile ticked up in one corner of his mouth. There was a careful stillness in the way he held himself that Billy recognised, had seen on him once or twice before; fingers clutching tight on his arms where they were folded across his chest, one leg jogging up and down. He was nervous. *Good*, the bitter part of him thought, *so he fucking should be*. Did he even know how lucky he was, the entitled little bastard? If anyone other than Billy had seen what'd happened, he would have been in a fuckload of trouble right now. Half the town would probably know. It made him feel sick.

"Hey," he said, and winced in annoyance at the creak in his voice. He cleared his throat.

"What's the damage then, Hargrove?" Steve said as Billy settled opposite him, leaning back against the Camaro.

He'd been about to say he was feeling fine, but well, that just wasn't true was it. "Minimal," he shrugged. "I'm not hungover."

"Lucky you," Steve said with a grimace, "whatever those guys from Hillside were handing out was fucked up."

"Huh." The anger came rushing up again, thick in his chest and up his throat, and then he was saying - "Not the only thing they were handing out though, was it, pretty boy?"

Shit. Well, looked like they were talking about it now then. He should have known he wouldn't be able to stop himself from running his mouth, worked up as he was. Steve went still, already tense posture stiffening up even more, a goddamned deer in the headlights. His eyes fixed on Billy, inescapable and scrutinising, pinned him down to the side of the Camaro. If Billy hadn't already known Steve'd been up to something, that fucking look would have given him away in a heartbeat.

"What?" his voice was pitched carefully low, quiet, like he was suddenly concerned about disturbing the stillness around them, of what they'd had, worried about the ripples after he'd already dropped a stone in the water. Too late, pretty boy.

"I think you know what I mean, Harrington," he drawled, tried for bored and annoyed more than the rolling anger-hurt-embarrassment galloping through him.

"Billy, I have no - "

"Cut the crap," he said. "I saw you." It came out sounding less unaffected than he'd intended, more upset, more pained. And honestly, he'd rather have been straight up angry than the frustrating mix of everything else he had going on. His eyes felt hot and watery, and what a fucking pussy, Jesus Christ. He swallowed the tears back,

worked to keep his voice even, and hard. "Saw you and that kid from Hillside tuggin' on each other's dicks in the bushes. Enjoy things a little alfresco, huh?"

"Shit," Steve looked away for a moment, chewed at his lip, arms folded even tighter around himself. When he finally turned back to Billy, he still looked a little desperate, but mostly just resigned, like he'd already decided Billy was going to fuck him over, no matter how hard he plead his case. Billy was hurt, somewhere small and deep down, that Steve thought he could do that to him now. He probably deserved it, but that didn't stop it from hurting. "Shit. Don't say anything, please? Kick my ass if you've gotta, Billy, that's - whatever. Just please don't - I only just - fuck." He put his hand over his forehead, hiding most of his face from Billy's view. Billy watched his jaw work, clench, unclench, but when he moved his hand away, his gaze was steady. It was hard though, empty. He looked like the Steve he used to catch glimpses of a few months ago, fathomless, cold, untouchable. Not the real one Billy'd lifted out from underneath. "What do you want?"

Again, and for a fleeting moment, Billy was taken aback that Steve could think he'd screw him over like that, after all the ground they'd made up in the past weeks. The way Steve had made Billy's skies feel clearer, and Billy had noticed the muck and silt weighing Steve down had started to lift away too, left him lighter, sparkling. But then he looked back over his past record, and thought, fair enough.

"Nothing," Billy said, and Steve's face hardened, drew up all angry and determined, ready to push back, until Billy continued - "there's nothing you need to do. I'm not going to rat on you and your boyfriend."

"I - you aren't?"

"No." It was Billy's turn to avoid his eye, couldn't look at him anymore, any last irrational and illogical, impossible hope he'd ever had of Steve being his slipping through his fingers with that promise. "I'm an asshole. Trash, lowest of the fucking low, and I've got the receipts to prove it pretty boy." The bruises on Steve's face over the run up to last Christmas, blood on his knuckles, the pinched look on Susan's face whenever he walked into the room, the way Max used to

curl her lip and glare and refuse to speak to him, burnt into his memory. Most of those things were over and gone now, but that didn't mean he could forget them. "But I couldn't do that. Not to you, not to fuckin' anybody."

"Shit," Steve said. Again. "I - " he let out a long breath. "Thanks."

"Yeah yeah," Billy said, "no need to cry about it, Harrington."

Steve huffed, and out of the corner of his eye, Billy saw him lean back against the Beemer again, arms still folded against the evening. But one finger was tapping against the sleeve of his jacket, a quick, rabbity little thumping. He was thinking about something. "He's not my - my boyfriend."

"What?" Billy said, jerked too quick out of his own head and not sure he'd heard him properly.

"Ethan," Steve said, "they guy from Hillside that you... saw me with." Billy looked across to see Steve already watching him, all tensed up again, looking like he was trying to pick his way across dangerous ground, dipping a toe into treacherous depths. "He's not my boyfriend." His lip curled, like the word tasted funny in his mouth.

"Oh." Though he tried to keep himself from showing it, the hope he'd balled up and tossed away earlier crept up through him again, light and gold as sun on water. Stupid of him really, to let it. He thought he would have learned, by now. "What then? You got some preppy guy as loaded as you hidden away or somethin'? You slumming it with that guy for kicks?" Though how he could have kept something that big a secret when he hung out with Billy almost every day and was a shitty liar was a mystery.

"No," Steve said plainly, ignored Billy's sour jab at him. "That was the first and probably last time I'll hook up with Ethan."

"Well, good for you," Billy said. "He that bad huh, to put you off dick for good?"

"No, he was - that isn't the point," Steve was losing patience, was pawing at his hair like he did when he felt a little frayed. In that

moment, it pissed Billy off that he knew all of his tics. "He was the first guy I - Look, let me just level with you man, okay? We're friends, right?"

Billy snorted. "Sure. Why not."

"Right. Okay. Well, I've sort of known I like girls and guys a while. But there was this one guy, who made me realise it like, fully, y'know? A friend. But he likes girls, and I wasn't brave enough to tell him." Steve was looking at him like he was watching for something specific as he fumbled through his explanation, waiting for Billy to take some cue from him. "And I - stupidly - followed advice from *Tommy*. Thought that if I could maybe fool around with another guy, it might help me get over it."

"It work?" Billy'd been there. Only with girls, to try and push the boys out of his head.

He laughed, a wet, choked little sound that sure as hell wasn't happy. "Nope."

Billy grunted. Fuck. His hope grew bigger, brighter, parted the fucking clouds. "So who's this guy you got your panties all twisted up over, Harrington?"

He was silent. Billy looked at him, finally felt brave enough to. He sort of wished he hadn't - he could see his hope mirrored back on Steve's face, and it was too fucking much. "Pretty sure you've figured that out by now, Hargrove. You're smart."

"Yeah?" Billy said. His belly felt like it was full of moths, all fluttery and trying to scramble up out of his throat, leaving it dry and dusty and difficult to push the words through. If he said it, there was no taking it back. What if he was wrong? "I dunno pretty boy. You might have to give me another clue."

"That right?" Steve said, and Billy startled at the anger in his voice, the sudden volume where he'd been so quiet before. He pushed himself up from the Beemer, shoes crunching on the grass and grit underfoot, as he shoved into Billy's space. "How's this?"

He kissed him.

Billy'd never really let himself dwell long on what it would be like to kiss Steve Harrington. And even in his wildest imaginings - there'd been a lot of them - he'd never envisioned Steve being the one to go in first. He'd always assumed that it'd be him, that one day a straw would break the camel's back, and he'd not be able to keep himself in check anymore, would push into Steve's space for one glorious moment of a kiss before Steve would ease him off, confused and embarrassed and politely trying to hide that he was grossed out at what his best friend wanted from him.

But, because apparently not everything that Billy touched went to shit, it didn't go like that. Steve tasted like beer, and Billy knew he couldn't be much better off, mouth hot and suddenly clumsy, lips a little too chapped. Steve went to pull away, Billy assumed because he thought he'd made his point and that was that, but then Billy whimpered - fucking embarrassing - and hauled him back in before he could. It was clinging and desperate, misjudged angles and fingers digging too hard, messier and more heady than any previous kiss he might have thought he'd poured his whole self into. It turned softer after a while, but no less intense for it, smiling against each others lips as Billy draped himself all over Steve, up against his Beemer and under the stars.

Notes for the Chapter:

FINALLY

13. An Hour Hand Moves Faster with a Scotch

Notes for the Chapter:

Beer and driving is bad kids, don't do it.

In the same way that Billy would meet him after a party with beer and jabs about how he'd made a fool of himself, Nance would call him up to check he hadn't actually drunk too much and finally given himself alcohol poisoning. He'd figured she might not have bothered after Joanne's party, considering she and Jonathan had been there for once, and had seen for themselves that he wasn't actually doing shots out of girls' mouths or whatever she seemed to think he got up to at parties. But no, despite having witnessed for herself he was mostly in a good place and hadn't slipped back to bad habits, she'd still worried enough to check up on him.

"You feeling okay? I was going to call yesterday, only I thought you might need a day to recover."

"I'm okay," he said. "I mean, I did feel kinda crappy yesterday, but..." he'd felt a lot of things yesterday. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure?" she sounded like she didn't believe him. He could imagine the little wrinkle in her nose that popped up whenever he was talking shit and she was worried.

"Yeah."

"Steve - "

"I'm fine, I promise. I just..." he exhaled, long and hard, tried to figure out the minimal he could get away with telling her. He was torn between wanting to spill everything and telling her it was none of her business. "I hooked up with someone," he heard himself say. "Someone I've sort of been thinking about for a long time."

"Oh," she sounded surprised, like she'd been expecting something either a lot more or a lot less trivial. "I - that's great! Someone um, someone at the party?"

"Uh," Steve hesitated. Yeah, technically he'd hooked up with someone at the party, but it wasn't Ethan he was thinking about. It was Billy. Always fucking Billy. "Yeah? They were there."

"Really? They go to our school?" She perked up a little bit, caught up in the chase.

"Yeah."

"Do I know her?"

Very much not a her, but - "yeah."

"You... don't sound all that excited," Nancy said more carefully. "I thought you said you were really into them?"

"I am, I just..." a little bit of truth wouldn't hurt right? "I find it hard to believe they're as into me, y'know?"

"Well," Nance was deep into practical mode now, he could picture her sitting up straight by the phone table, one hand neat in her lap the other curled around the phone, "what makes you think that, exactly?"

"We didn't talk about it all that much." Or at all. He'd told Billy he liked him, and they kissed. That was it. And, fucking great as it had been, Steve wasn't as secure about that stuff as he used to be, never had been when it came to someone he really cared about, was just good at covering it up. "Or at all. I don't know. I just... feel like I've got a lot to lose if it doesn't work out."

"Oh Steve," she said, and he could hear the bitten back smile in her voice, the same as she used to when he'd tell her she looked beautiful, or he'd ask her a question about a paper she was writing. "I know neither of us like to talk about... about us. And going over all of that again won't do us any favours now, but – you did make me happy Steve. Don't argue," she said before he could contest it, "you did, okay. There's no reason why you can't make someone else even happier. You were a great boyfriend. I maybe should have told you that more."

"Nance," she was right, he really didn't want to talk about it, "I – "

“But what are you still talking to me for anyway?” she cut him off, “you’ve got a girl to go sweep off her feet, classic Steve Harrington style. So go to it.”

“I – thanks, Nance. Bye.”

#

He picked Billy up not long after. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting after last night – either Billy to deck him for kissing him now he’d had the time to recover, or to be all over him, like he was with girls. But he definitely hadn’t been ready for him to act like nothing had happened at all. Billy got into the car with little fanfare, just a grin and a ‘Hey Harrington,’ and a stinging flick at his ear, then just bitched about Max for most of the drive. They’d reached the edges of town, driving as they did sometimes with no destination in mind, swallowed up by the darkening evening, the muffled quiet of the trees all around them. Even now, Steve couldn’t help but absently worry over what might’ve been hiding in them. It was around then Steve decided he couldn’t take not knowing where he stood anymore, and sharply pulled the car over to the side of a quiet road to get things straightened out before he fucking lost it.

“Hargrove,” he started, looked down at his hands on the wheel and wished his voice didn’t sound so strained, “Billy, what – “

He was cut off when Billy lunged at him across the centre console, grabbing him by the back of the neck and hauling him in for an absolutely filthy kiss. Would have been filthier if Steve had actually responded right away instead of freezing, gaping like an idiot while Billy licked and bit at his mouth.

“Steve,” Billy breathed against his lips, “c’mon Harrington, you’re killin’ me here.” The sound of his name in Billy’s wrecked voice and more insistent kisses woke him up. He kissed him back then, hard presses of lips and a hand snagged in Billy’s hair. “Wanted to do that as soon as I got in the car,” Billy said between kisses, when they’d cooled off a little, “couldn’t though. My dad was probably looking out the goddamn window. Already asks too many questions about you.”

That gave Steve pause. What kind of things was Billy's dad asking? And from what Billy had let slip about his dad before, he was kind of a hardass. It couldn't be anything good. "What do you – "

"Here," Billy pulled away, ducked to grab the six pack he'd brought with him and stashed down by his boots. He pulled a can loose, held it to Steve.

"I'm driving, asshole." His lips felt numb.

"Yeah yeah, one won't hurt," Billy pressed until Steve took it. "We've all driven after a few beers man, don't pretend otherwise."

Steve rolled his eyes and took the can, because yeah, Billy was right, he'd definitely driven after more than one lone beer, stupid of him as that probably was. "Thanks."

"There he is," Billy grinned and raised his can before knocking most of it back.

And once again, Steve was left feeling like he didn't know where he stood. He'd spent the last twenty minutes psyching himself up for rejection, for a slap on the back and a 'hahaha I was messing with you Harrington, forget it,' only to be faced with the opposite. Billy had finished his first beer and drunk most of the second, before he was crawling into Steve's space again, stretching up to tug Steve's lip between his teeth, scatter soft little teasing kisses to the edges of his mouth. His intent to ask Billy exactly what they were doing with each other crumbled away more with every press of his lips. Did it really matter, what they were? Did he really need a label for it? Whether they were just fooling around or whether it turned out to be something more... something more, in that moment, Steve was getting exactly what he wanted. And he had all the time in the world to get his head straight about the whole thing later, comb through everything and figure it out, but for now, he could lose himself in Billy.

"Move your seat back."

"Huh?" Billy had literally kissed him stupid. Not that it took much.

“Move your chair,” Billy said again, voice rough and low, “more room.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Billy clambered out of the passenger side, and Steve pulled the lever to slide his seat back. It'd barely clicked into place before Billy had opened the door and was climbing into his lap, a thick thigh either side of Steve's legs. He was frowning a little, question on his face, like he was waiting for Steve to tell him it was okay. God, he felt like an idiot. He'd been so busy wondering if Billy was going to ditch him, he'd never even suspected Billy might have been feeling the same. It didn't seem possible. He still looked hesitant, tense, as if he was steeling himself ready to be hurt – or to hurt; Steve knew him well enough to know that his idea of the best defence was definitely a good offense. On realising that Billy was just as worked up over it as he was, Steve felt a sort of calm, a relief, slide over him. Billy was just as worried he was going to fuck up as he was, just as scarily caught up in it all. And that made him brave enough for the both of them.

“Hey,” he smiled, reached up to place a hand on the side of Billy's face, felt him press into it, “I got you, man.”

Billy's face flickered, concern to surprise to something closer to his usual leering. “Mm. I bet you do,” he quirked his eyebrow, rocked his hips down hard and slow.

Steve snorted, marvelled at how easy it seemed to flip between laughing at each other like they did at school, the diner, the movies, and something deeper, serious and more intimate. “Yeah yeah, cool it big guy. I just gotta ask you something.” Despite feeling more sure of himself than when he'd set out that evening, Steve was still feeling wobbly, a tiny but insistent doubt that it was too good to be true, or that he was moments away from fucking it up. He hadn't talked things through properly with Nancy when they were both struggling, and though it wasn't the sole reason they'd fallen apart, it certainly hadn't helped. He wasn't doing that shit again.

“What?” Billy blinked at him.

"Are you sure?"

"About what?"

"That you uh... want me? You could have any girl you wanted, man."

Billy dropped his head to snort a soft laugh into Steve's neck. "Firstly," he said when he looked up again, "I like dick. Though that'd be pretty clear by now. Secondly, I'm necking with King Steve in his swanky Beemer, I'm hardly fucking slumming it."

"Dickhead," Steve scrunched up his nose and poked Billy hard in the ribs.

"Agh, fuck you," Billy yelped and squirmed in his lap, batted his hand away. "Of all the assholes I could have fallen for..."

"C'mere," Steve said, and Billy dived in to kiss him again, though this time, Steve noticed something stronger than beer on his tongue. "Were you drinking before I picked you up?"

"Mm," Billy said into his mouth, "a couple swallows of whiskey. I... was a little nervous, okay? Thought you were going to tell me to take a hike. Still sorta waiting for it, honestly."

"And here was me thinking it was going to be the other way around."

"Never."

They fell into another kiss, close and desperate with the mutual relief drenching over them. *He wants me.* He knew Billy wasn't drunk, not from a beer and a half and a mouthful of whiskey; he'd seen Keg King Billy Hargrove drunk, and that was not it. But there was a little more softness to him than usual, the same dizziness Steve was feeling, cramped and overwarm in the front seat, stuffy and blurred like a photograph out of focus. Unwilling to lose the closeness for a second, Steve urgently pushed himself further into Billy's space, stuck his hand in the back pocket of his jeans, tugged his shirt free of his pants to clasp his hands over the hot skin of Billy's lower back and hips. Billy rumbled and did the same, rucked up Steve's sweater as high as he could, ran his hands all over him, like he couldn't pick where to touch first.

“What’s this?” he pulled away, and Steve was lost for a moment watching his kiss swollen lips, the downward cast of his eyelashes over his cheek. It was too dark for him to see the blue of Billy’s eyes, they were a washed out grey in the dark evening, but bright, and only on him.

“What’s what?”

“This.”

He realised then that Billy was running a calloused fingertip back and forth over a scar near his hip, a silvery roundish bump of skin. “Oh,” he looked down at it. “I uh, passed out at a party. Dropped a cigarette and fell asleep on it.”

“Damn Harrington, you’re a liability. Between that and your weird long toes, who the fuck would have you?”

“Only a complete moron, clearly,” Steve said and Billy snorted again. “And shut the fuck up, my toes are not weird.”

“They are freakishly long, Harrington.”

“Yeah, well, that’s just how I’m proportioned,” he held up his hand, wriggled his long fingers right in Billy’s face to make his point.

Billy cast a pointed look down at the front of Steve’s pants. “Don’t I know it, gorgeous.”

“Shut up,” Steve grinned, soft and stupid, hauled Billy down for more kissing. Classic Steve Harrington style.

14. No One Needs to Know

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a kind of interlude that has mostly no relevance to the plot, which is why it's so little. It's not crazy filthy, but it does feature oral fixation, coming in jeans, and some more semi-public sex, so if those things aren't your jam, you can straight up skip this chapter if you like.

Steve was waiting for him after class, that cute, goofy little smile on his face that meant either he thought he was being incredibly clever, or that he was about to do something *sappy* that Billy would have to pretend to be disgusted by, but secretly made him see hearts. Though he second guessed himself when Steve led him into the deserted gym. It had the same lingering sweat and cold, stale air smell it always did, with the clean, cloying edge of the wax they used to polished the floor. There was no one around, even the hall outside was quiet after the students had beat a hasty retreat at the end of the day. Although the gym was empty, Steve ushered him over to duck under the bleachers out of sight.

“What are we doing here, Harrington?” Billy said once they were tucked away under the seats, stripes of yellow light coming through the slats, making Steve squint at him a little. Though by that point, Billy was pretty sure he knew why Steve had brought him there.

He knew because, as clever and subtle as Billy believed himself to be sometimes, when he felt strongly about something – Steve for instance – things were more likely to slip through the cracks. All it had taken was a few risky goodbye kisses in the car, a teasing grope behind the convenience store and an accidental touch under the desk at school for Steve to have him all figured out, apparently. It looked like he'd come to the conclusion that Billy was into fooling around in public places; or halfway public anyway, he wasn't stupid. And... he wasn't wrong. It had started off as the simple joy that came with the freedom not being at home granted him to hook up with whoever he wanted, knowing his dad wasn't about to barge in and give him what for. Honestly, even being under the same roof as his dad was a big

old boner killer; Billy could barely even jerk off in his own room anymore. It was something he'd been sort of aware of since puberty hit properly, but since being with Steve, it had... progressed.

Steve shrugged and slid his hands into his jean pockets, smile just as sly, falsely innocent, as Billy's was. "I dunno baby. You tell me."

"Don't play dumb, sweetheart," Billy said, grabbed a hold of Steve by the collar of his polo, and hauled him up against the peeling paint of the back wall. He stopped a hair's breadth from kissing him, breathing in the traces of his pricey cologne left at the end of the school day. "I know why we're here."

"Yeah?" Steve said, confidence dimming for just a moment. "Is it okay? We don't have to, you've just been a bit tense and I just thought you might wanna –"

Billy kissed him, felt Steve melt up against him, smiling big and happy under Billy's mouth as he wound his arms around his neck. He couldn't help himself, moved his kisses lower to run in a chaotic line down Steve's neck, spit and too much tooth, to worry at the almost faded mark he'd left there last week when they'd hooked up in Steve's car, yellowed and barely visible now on the side of his throat.

"Shit," Steve hissed as Billy's teeth grazed the bruise, fingers twisting a little harder into Billy's hair to hold him there.

Billy hummed, sucked gently at the skin, licking, biting soft. Simply put, he enjoyed the feeling of having something to occupy his mouth. He found it relaxing. It wasn't an inherently sexual thing either; it was why he spent so much on gum and cigarettes. And if he couldn't have either of those, he'd have his thumbnail or his pendant between his teeth. After a drink or two though, it tended to become nothing *but* sexual, which is how he'd ended up going to town on Steve's neck last week, had zeroed in on the hot, thin skin and sucked until Steve was gasping.

Steve must have noticed his weird fixation at some point – and honestly Harrington being so fucking good at reading his partners' needs was something Billy had latched onto in fantasy but hadn't expected in reality, though all the rumours surrounding King Steve's dating habits should have prepared him for it – because when things

started to get real hot and heavy, he carefully pried Billy away from his neck. Looking a bit unsure, frowning just a little and head cocked to the side, he raised his hand to gently offer his first two fingers to Billy's mouth.

Shit. Billy must have left it a moment too long in surprise, in sheer fucking delight at the mere existence of Steve Harrington, because he looked awkward as hell and lowered his hand again.

"Sorry," he said, more to a stray candy wrapper on the floor than to Billy, "I just thought – "

"Nope," Billy shook his head, grabbed Steve's wrist to bring his fingers back up his lips, "no take-backs, pretty boy." He took a moment to just rest Steve's index and middle finger on his bottom lip, looking up to see Steve watching him with wide eyes. He left dry kisses along the length of his finger, licked at the pads before he drew them into his mouth, breathing out hard through his nose at the relief of it.

"God," Steve said, "you look fucking gorgeous, baby, fuck."

Billy just groaned a little, sucked harder on Steve's fingers. He pushed in closer, knocked Steve's legs apart with his knee so he could fit his thigh in between, gave him something to rub up against.

"Shit, Billy..."

Steve grabbed at him to get him as close as he could. Hands splayed on his ass to haul him in, one over the denim, the other over his underwear, fingertips just over the hem and pressing into hot skin. He locked a leg around Billy to keep them close as they rocked themselves gracelessly up into each other. It was fast and filthy and a little uncomfortable and so so stupid, and it was the fucking *best*. Billy could feel the hard ridge of Steve's dick through their clothes, felt his own dick twitch against the drag of denim. Desperate, he kept mouthing at his fingers, spit down his chin. The combination of all of it – the panting little groans Steve was making, Billy's mouth full, dick leaking, the thrill of it all happening somewhere so public, hit him like a fucking train, and he came with barely any warning, wet and pulsing in his jeans.

Quick and dirty as it was, Billy was left reeling afterwards, the only sound his own loud breathing. Head pleasantly thick, lax and perfectly wrung out, he started to come back down from the rush of it. He was going to feel nasty if he didn't go home to shower soon, but it was too nice a feeling to break himself away from so quick. As the rest of the world started to seep back in around the edges, he felt Steve gently ease his fingers out of his mouth so he could kiss him, just slow little soft kisses to bring him back down gently.

"Easy big guy. That was – fuck. You were incredible," he said, kissing Billy's cheek.

Billy hummed in agreement, jaw aching and tongue feeling too big in his mouth. "We're not done yet," he said, reached down between them both to palm at Steve through his jeans, hot and hard and big enough to make Billy's mouth water a little. He swallowed. "You haven't come yet, sweetheart. And we gotta keep that big ol' dick of yours happy, right baby?"

Steve snorted. "You're a tacky bitch, you know that?"

"Yeah, I'm your tacky bitch." Billy nipped at mouth.

"Ugh, don't remind me," Steve said, but he was smiling as he kissed behind Billy's ear.

"Besides, there's no accounting for taste, baby."

Steve poked him in the side and he yelped, made a big deal of puffing up ready to pinch him in return, but before he could there was a noise from the hall outside that made them both freeze in their tracks. *Shit*. They'd been fooling around so long that the janitors had started working.

"Fuck," Steve said, eyes big and face still pink, "we've gotta go."

"I – " before Billy could protest, Steve grabbed his hand, led him stumbling on still wobbly legs down the hall, laughing and tripping over each other, shoes squeaking on the just waxed floors as they attempted to duck their way past the bemused janitors to the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

Dumb I know, but I had fun. I had The Scorpions' No One Like You playing while I wrote this, if you want to set the tone lol.

15. Take Your Time

Notes for the Chapter:

Some plot arrives, ten chapters too late with Starbucks.

Warning of vague, very brief references to Tommy injuring a cat?? Idk, it just felt like I should mention it.

They were graduating in a few days. Steve had thought he'd be alright with it; he'd never had any strong feelings about school, thought he'd be glad to see the back of it, actually. But that was before, when he'd thought he had *after* all planned out. Now he just felt kind of lost, one more rope cut that had been keeping him anchored steady for so long. None of it was helped by the fact that Tommy was leaving next week too.

"I just really hope that fucking cat of hers has bitten the dust," said Tommy, blowing out a stream of smoke that got lost in the cloudy afternoon behind the math block, "little fleabag always hated me."

"Maybe because of that time you set it on *fire*," Steve said, handed the cigarette they were sharing back to him. They hadn't shared a smoke like that in years, not since the first time one of them had stolen a single cigarette out of their mother's handbag - he'd forgotten who'd done it first, though Tommy had always been braver about that sort of thing - and brought it out triumphantly one afternoon when they'd been skipping school together. They'd passed it back and forth between them, end damp with spit and the both of them coughing and wincing at the taste, but pleased with themselves, like they'd suddenly become grown-ups. That was the first time they'd smoked together, and though it went unsaid, each had a feeling this might be the last. When Tommy had lit up, taken a drag and held it out to Steve, he hadn't questioned it, or lit his own.

Tommy shrugged. "Only a little bit."

"Yeah, I hate to break it to you man, but I don't think there's a way

you can only set a cat *a little bit* on fire.”

“Well it didn’t die, did it,” Tommy said, tapped the loose ash away, “unfortunately.”

“She hasn’t met Carol before, has she?” Steve shifted his weight where they sat on the steps. The concrete was cold. “Your grandma?”

“Nope,” Tommy said with a smirk, perking up a little, “they’re going to be at each other’s throats all summer, I can feel it. But y’know, in that kinda dumb way that means they like each other, like girls do sometimes.”

“Good luck with that.”

Tommy and Carol were going to stay with his grandma in Florida for the summer. His mom was going through some shit, and they’d decided it would be better for the both of them if Tommy wasn’t there for a while. Which Steve felt kind of bad about; his family wasn’t perfect by any means, but they’d never actively asked him to fuck off. But he still didn’t know how he really felt about Tommy leaving. It might have been a bit of an asshole thing to think, but he’d always just assumed Tommy and Carol would be in Hawkins forever. A constant. A thing he’d never really expected to change or to lose.

“Carol’s excited though,” Tommy shook his head, smile gone a little soft at the talk of his girlfriend. “She’s playing it cool but I can tell. She’s never left the state before.”

Neither have you, Steve thought. He knew Tommy’d be able to take care of himself one way or another, but that didn’t stop him worrying. Just a little bit, anyway. Another thing he hadn’t been expecting after the bumpy couple of years the two of them had gone through, but it was an easy habit to fall back into, apparently. “It’ll give you two the exciting opportunity to fuck somewhere that isn’t the back of Carol’s mom’s car.”

Tommy snorted and punched him on the arm. “Very funny. Speaking of,” he said, stubbing out the butt of the cigarette on the step he was sitting on, “you and Hargrove are boning, right?”

Steve sputtered, froze up with dread, felt his neck go hot. "What? No."

"You're a shitty liar, Stevie. I know the two of you are hooking up."

"Of course we're not, Jesus. Fucking crazy," Steve knew he sounded like he was grasping at straws, knew he sounded more riled up about it than Tommy did. Didn't stop him from going on the offensive though; he knew Billy would fucking hate it if Tommy knew about them. "The fuck made you ask that?"

But Tommy hadn't asked - he already knew. "C'mon Steve, I saw you two necking when he dropped you home last week."

Which made... no sense. Tommy lived nowhere near Loch Nora. "What were you doing all the way out there?"

"I was on my way back after taking Carol to her fancy aunt's place - "

"Fancy Aunt Hilda?"

"Yeah. Saw him drag you across the seat and suck your face right off before you got out."

That wasn't true - Steve remembered that kiss, and it had actually been pretty gentle, as far as Billy's goodbye kisses went. But on every other count, he couldn't really argue. "Oh."

"I'm not gunna tell," Tommy waved him away before Steve could even ask, "I never told before and I'm not going to now, so don't flip out on me. I just... I dunno, wanted you to know I know? If that makes sense. Wish you two assholes good luck before I go or whatever." He cleared his throat. Steve did know, they used to share like, everything, right down to their school lunches. And it was nice, in a way, to have someone in on it. Made him feel less like he was lying to everybody. "And also to tell you to be more careful, dumbass. If Carol had seen, the whole town'd know by now."

"Shit, you're right." He looked at Tommy for a moment, appalled, before the two of them burst into laughter, proper, loud laughter that echoed all around the back of the school building.

#

It was late, dark, and instead of being holed up at Steve's house, making out on the sofa and ignoring a shitty movie on TV, they were in the woods. Steve had had a bad night yesterday, woken up wide eyed and tired and twitchy, barely together enough to see his parents off to wherever they were spending a long weekend. Even his mom had said he looked poorly when she'd kissed him goodbye. He'd smoothed himself out by the time he'd gotten to school, felt the familiar muffled glaze settle over him, like he was lying under thick, stagnant water. He hadn't sunk into it for a while, not that badly at least, since he and Billy had started hanging out. But if the dark, worried looks Billy'd been giving him whenever they'd caught sight of each other at school that day were anything to go by, he'd noticed it. Talking to Tommy in the parking lot after class had actually helped a little, had let some yellowish and promising light seep back in and flicker through the murky waters above him. But later on as darkness had settled over Hawkins, memories of his bad night had crawled back to him, the feeling of change and uncertainty at Tommy's leaving, losing a constant that he'd had in his life for over a decade, had left him in a bit of a state. Billy had in turn tried to both calm him down and rile him up, anything to stop him feeling so wrong. But eventually, he'd pulled away from where the two of them had been sitting on the couch, and asked him – "what do you need?"

So they'd gone into the woods. Billy had looked at him like he was crazy when he'd first told him what he wanted to do, but then his face had settled into grim acceptance, and he'd nodded, led Steve out to the car. The woods were dark, air heavy and thick like it was about to rain. The warmth of it, muggy and earthy, almost choking, was oddly reassuring next to the chilling memory of Will Byers' insistence that 'he likes it cold.' He had the bat in one hand, Billy's hand in the other, both a comfort in their way. He liked having Billy there; the quiet crackling energy of him by Steve's side, rough thumb stroking over the inside of his wrist. And he'd been starting to feel better, reassured, after a half hour or so in the woods, seeing with his own eyes that everything was okay. But then he noticed how quiet it was. How the rustling of night animals and birds had fallen away to nothing as they walked further through the trees. Even Billy looked as though he felt it. Billy, who'd barely questioned any of Steve's

messed up habits, looked into the darkness around them and said –

“Something’s wrong.”

Then he saw it.

It was dead, there was no question of that. The smell alone was enough to make that obvious. He dimly heard Billy swear and gag into his sleeve. It was all bone, greenish grey skin pulled taught over its body, an old wound at its shoulder long since turned black and crusted over. There were no maggots though, no flies. Nothing would touch it, go anywhere near it. Its terrible flower petal face lay open and slack, teeth poking through the pitted, dark flesh of its mouth. He hadn’t seen a demodog, dead or alive, since November.

“The fuck is that thing?” Billy was saying next to him. “Is it a dog? No, too big. God, it fucking stinks.”

But Steve barely heard him. Panic was clawing its way up from the pit of his belly, like boiling, bubbling water, but thicker, choking and vile. He was back in the tunnels, dark and cold, air too dense and bluish, the vines crawling over the walls and the floor. They were running towards him, them, mouths open and – no they weren’t. He tried to get a handle on himself, took a ragged breath that hurt the back of his throat, told himself the facts. They were dead, and Steve was alive. He was fine, the kids were fine. But that didn’t mean everything was okay, in fact it raised a whole lot more questions. They hadn’t seen any signs of ‘dogs for months. How long had that one been there? Had someone killed it? Had anyone else seen it? Fuck, he’d have to tell Hop, he’d know what to –

“Steve!”

He blinked. Billy was in front of him, holding Steve’s face between his hands and looking worried. It wasn’t a look he wore so openly so often, which was enough to help drag Steve up from the spiral he’d been falling into. It wasn’t until then that Steve really registered he’d been freaking out.

“That’s it, come back to me, baby.” Billy put an arm around his shoulders, huffed in relief, hot on Steve’s cheek. “Fuck.”

Steve's head was still buzzing. But logically, he knew there was nothing more he could do without checking in with Hop. As much as he itched to do it, patrolling in search of more would have been fucking stupid, and this one looked long dead anyway. He wasn't about to move it either.

"Help me," he said, licked his lips, mouth dry, "help me cover it up."

He heaped leaves and sticks and moss and whatever shit he could reach over the dead demodog to hide it from view, Billy muttering a curse and ducking down to help. When they were done, Steve yanked a glove out of his pocket, and left it on a branch to mark the spot. But after that, there was nothing else to be done. He needed a distraction. A fact which Billy seemed to pick up on, casting him worried little looks and plucking at his cold hand. He needed to go home and not think about it, fill himself up with something else, so there was no room for that image of the dead demodog to fester in his head. And that something else was standing right in front of him.

"Take me home," he said.

"Whatever you need, baby," Billy said, still rubbing at Steve's hand as he tugged them back through the trees towards the car. As the trees started to thin, Steve noticed it was raining, only sparsely, the odd cold drop a shock in the humid air. By the time Billy had bundled him into the car and driven them back to Steve's place, one hand in his the whole time, it had gotten heavier. By the time they were getting out of the car, it was seriously raining, a thick warm heavy summer downpour, hammering on the windshield and on them as they made a dash back inside the house. Once indoors, they were soaked through, breathing heavy in the well-lit hallway, Billy half smiling at the absurdity of it, the simple delight of getting caught in the rain. A stray raindrop slid down his nose and into his lip, where he licked it away without a thought.

Steve kissed him, bruising and uncoordinated, fingers numb from the wet. Billy seemed to grasp that he needed to not think about what they'd just seen, kissed him back equally fiercely and backed him up into a wall. They tugged at each other's clothes, the fabric insisting on clinging wetly to their skin, leaving Steve frustrated and hands twisted up in Billy's soaked shirt. He whined in annoyance, and Billy

laughed and ran his fingers through his wet hair.

“C’mon,” he said into Steve’s temple, “let’s get you upstairs.”

They went up, Billy gently pushing, nudging Steve up each step, around corners, through doors, Steve stopping every chance he could to taste Billy’s upper lip, his throat, his palm. He didn’t want to stop touching him, even for a moment. And each time he did it, Billy looked at him in disbelief, in wonder, biting back a smile like he didn’t want Steve to see. That only made him do it more.

In Steve’s room, Billy pulled the curtains to shut out the blue light from the pool below. He turned to look at Steve a moment before moving to undress them both; Steve’s fingers still didn’t seem to be working properly. They felt cold and heavy and not his, capable of snagging in Billy’s hair or squeezing at his shoulder, but not undoing buttons or zippers. Damp clothes eventually off and tossed aside, the two of them had almost dried off apart from their hair, though Steve still felt dimly cold, Billy’s skin chill under his hands. He pressed closer into Billy’s hold, coiling himself around him as near as he could get.

“You’re sure?” Billy asked, pulling back just enough to say the words, “I know you said you needed a distraction, but you’re sure this is... fuck, I don’t know, the right one?”

“Hm?” Steve could feel the weight of Billy’s dick on his hip.

“You’re obviously not okay right now,” Billy said gruffly, face twitching at the sensation of Steve rubbing up against him, “and I can’t believe I’m fuckin’ saying this, but I won’t do this if you’re going to feel shitty about it later.”

It was in equal parts irritating, because Steve knew what he wanted, thanks very much, and achingly sweet that he cared enough to ask. Six-months-ago-Billy wouldn’t have. “The last thing I’m going to feel about what we’re about to do is shitty,” he mouthed at Billy’s neck, felt him swallow under his lips, “please Billy. I need you right now, okay?” And he was distantly mad he sounded so needy, but he *felt* needy, so he didn’t have much of an argument to build on there. “Unless you don’t want – “

"Of course I want," Billy said, tugged Steve up to kiss him like he needed, hard and desperate and enough to take all Steve's focus.

Their skin was cool and tacky from the rain, still coming down in thick, relentless sheets and thudding on the window. Steve let himself be bundled under the covers, feeling warmer already with Billy's hands rubbing up and down his arms, hot breath on his neck. They kissed a while, a length of time Steve wasn't quite sure of, slow and comfortable and a little bit sloppy. Every now and then Billy would pull back to murmur something stupidly sweet Steve thought he probably didn't deserve, the kind of shit that made his heart feel like it was about to bust right out of his chest. Then his kisses strayed further down, along his neck and to his chest, tugging soft at his nipples, licking, mouthing, teasing.

"What do you want me to do with you, gorgeous?" Billy said when he raised his head, dazed and mouth a little swollen, looking down at him.

"Anything baby," Steve said, running his hands clumsily over any part of Billy he could reach, "anything, just – Please?"

"You got it." He ducked out from under the sheets to rummage in Steve's nightstand until he found the lube, making a small noise of disgust as he appeared back above him. "We left the cap off. It's leaked all over your math book."

Steve laughed, short and tired, "I don't care. School's almost done anyway."

Then Billy was kissing him again, groaning in the back of his throat as he reached down to nudge Steve's legs apart, pushing his thigh up so he could gently rub at him. The weight of him made Steve feel safe, contained, the solidness of him between his spread legs as he worked him open, hot and slow and steady. When Billy pulled back a little to press deeper, Steve found himself staring at the mole on Billy's upper arm, wanting to kiss it. But he was too blissed out, unable to move, pinned under Billy's eyes, his body, his fingers. He kept his strokes steady and painfully slow despite Steve's twisting and squirming and trying to get just that little bit more from him. Billy was all around him, damp heavy breaths and his hair over his face,

dried into messier, tighter curls than the ones he teased them into every morning. It smelt like rain and earth and warm sheets, like breath and sweat and two bodies. It felt like it'd been building for hours, but when Steve came it was sudden, each slow, rolling pulse of it stronger than the one before, mouth falling open at the sensation, and Billy working him through it, whispering that everything was okay.

#

After both of them had come down a bit, Steve bundled himself up in sheets and Billy as best he could, let the warmth of Billy's body and the soft yellowish glow of the lamp by his bed soak into him. He stroked the tip of his finger along the soft inside of Billy's upper arm, along the tender silvery ridges left behind from when he'd hit the weights too hard and bulked up too quick. He smelt like warm rain, the ever present trace of cigarette smoke and leather car seats.

"Can you tell me about that thing?" he said soft into Steve's hair, hand on Steve's belly, plucking gently through the hair below his belly button.

"Billy," he tried, "I can't – there's just – "

"Hey," Billy headed him off, "hey, no, shh babe. I don't mean right now. Just... sometime. I feel like that's the kind of shit I can't just pretend didn't happen, y'know?"

"Right."

"Doesn't have to be the whole story, even, if you don't want. Just a tiny bit of context sweetheart, because honestly that thing freaked me the fuck out."

Steve breathed. Realised that working up to telling Billy about it would probably keep him up at night. He felt flat and exhausted and wrung out already, he just as well do what he could bear to right now. "You remember when you beat the shit outta me at the Byers'?" he said before he could think too hard on it.

He felt Billy suck in a sharp breath. He'd long since tried to apologise,

several times over, but that still didn't mean either of them liked to talk about it. "Yeah."

"That thing is what was going on. Was why the kids were there, was why we couldn't tell you the truth. Probably still shouldn't be. God, they made us sign so much paperwork."

"But I saw it," Billy said. "That ain't your fault."

"You wouldn't have been in the woods if it weren't for me."

"Technically," Billy shrugged behind him, Steve felt the lift and dip of his shoulder. "I won't tell if you don't. So, all the kids know?"

"Yeah," Steve said, throat a little dry and waiting for the other shoe to drop. "And Nancy and Jonathan. Mrs Byers. And Hopper."

"The chief of police?"

"Yeah."

"Right."

"Mm," Steve yawned, sniffed. Fuck, he was tired.

"Okay, story time's over dumbass," Billy kissed the top of his head. "Thanks for telling me and stuff."

"S'okay," Steve twisted, buried himself deeper, tried to get his words straight. "It's... sort of a relief that you know? I just – bad memories." He felt Billy's arm tighten around his middle. "Thanks for, y'know. Making sure I didn't completely lose my shit back there." He yawned again. "Guess you're not a total jerk."

"Glowing fucking praise, I'm sure. Go to sleep, baby."

Notes for the Chapter:

Did I kneel down on the floor to figure out the logistics of that position? Yes.

16. But I'm Betting that You'll do it All Again

Notes for the Chapter:

Billy meets El.

I'm still not clear if Billy is meant to be in the year below Steve, or whether he's just a few months younger, but for the sake of this they're both graduating the same year.

Billy felt sort of... off. Like something had finished, and something had started, and he was caught up in the middle. They'd graduated. School was done, but it didn't feel like the weight off his shoulders Billy'd always thought it would. Sure, his dad couldn't bitch about his grades anymore, but he'd find something else. And then there was everything Steve had told him a week ago. He hadn't wanted to prod him too much more about it, since he obviously didn't want to and possibly couldn't say much else, but not knowing had left Billy feeling caged and twitchy. But he hadn't been able to stop himself from asking what they were going to do about the monster they'd found in the woods. Steve had smiled tightly, told him that Chief Hopper would be taking care of it, and abruptly turned his back on him to make a sandwich. There was a lot of gaps in what Steve had been able to share with him, a lot that either didn't make sense or was hard to believe, stuff that he was under contract not to blab about. But Billy had seen that thing in the woods; had seen the trees thick and green just like you'd expect in summer, but how around that... that thing, everything had suddenly felt like it was on the turn, dank and overripe and rotten, sickly sweetness thick in the still air. He'd felt like he could've choked on it. And remembered enough about that night last November for it all to come together enough for him to believe.

He found himself pulling back from Steve, just enough to look at the hair thin, silver-white scar on Steve's temple. He'd put that there. It was the wrong moment to be thinking about that though, what with Steve's tongue down his throat and a hand down his pants, palming at his ass while they made out in the kitchen.

“What’s the matter?” Steve said, a little thickly, against Billy’s mouth. “Why’d you stop, baby?”

“Because,” Billy said, tensing his ass under Steve’s hand and enjoying the reflexive squeeze he got in return, “as much as I don’t give a fuck about whatever dumb plans you’ve got with the kids this afternoon, they’ll fuck you up if you’re late again.”

“We.”

“Hm?”

“If *we’re* late.”

“Oh no,” Billy shook his head as Steve disentangled himself from him, “I’m not going with you. It’s your gig, pretty boy.”

“Nope, you’re not getting out of it this time, handsome,” Steve said, pressed a smacking kiss to his cheek, “they want you to meet their friend.”

“Right,” he highly fucking doubted that. “Forgive me if I find that a little hard to believe, Harrington.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever man,” Steve said, pulling away to grab a baseball bat from where it leant against the wall, “you can sulk about it in the car.”

#

Billy was genuinely surprised the nerds had actually chosen to spend the afternoon outside playing sports. He wasn’t counting Max, he knew she knew what she was doing, but the boys definitely seemed like indoor hobby kinda kids. Because y’know. Nerds. But Steve had said something about a friend of theirs who’d never played baseball before, and the boys had promised to help her learn. What kind of kid had never played baseball before Billy didn’t know, but Max had mentioned her friend – Ellie? – having a weird time growing up before, so over protective parents maybe, or some other crap he couldn’t bring himself to care all that much about.

He was sprawled out on a blanket off to the side of the field, having

refused to join in. He didn't hate baseball, but he didn't like it all that much either, and definitely didn't have the patience to go easy on a bunch of kids. They'd probably prefer it if he didn't play anyway. Sinclair and Henderson didn't seem too phased by him anymore, but Wheeler was always giving him a death stare (though in fairness he was still like that with Steve too) and little Byers could barely look at him at all. The weather wasn't much of an encouragement for him to run about either. It was heavy and humid out, clouds low and grey over the field. He could feel the heat coming up from the ground where the sun had soaked in, the prickling feeling of another storm coming on. It made the air feel soupy, full of pollen in a way that made Steve sniffly, eyes watery and red. Not that it'd stopped him wanting to play. He seemed genuinely excited to be teaching the kids too, the big dork, despite his complaining they were all little shits, and was running through a few pointers with them while they waited for their friend to show. He was facing away from Billy as he swung the bat, talking patiently over the kids' complaining that they "know how to play already Steve, *God*," and Billy was given another reason to be glad he wasn't playing – the view. Steve had pushed up the sleeves of his blue – fucking baby blue – shirt, fabric taut across his shoulders as Billy watched the bunch and pull of the muscles in his back, thoughts straying as he wondered idly if Steve would be able to lift him up against a wall. Damn.

"Mm, throw me up against the wall, sweetheart," he said to himself as he watched Harrington swing the bat. He was so caught up in thoughts of biting the lean muscle over Steve's shoulder blade, that he didn't notice the person appear at the edge of his blanket until the last moment.

"Shit!" he jumped at the pair of tennis shoes suddenly by his head, looked up to see a girl watching him solemnly, expression at odds with the yellow barrette with a kitten face on in her hair. "The fuck did you come from?"

She pointed across the grass, to where a police truck was driving away down the dirt road, the chief glaring at Billy out of the window as he rounded the corner.

Billy rolled his eyes, "of fuckin' course." How convenient everyone had forgotten to mention she was the chief of police's brat. He needed

a smoke. "You're Max's friend?"

She kept looking down at him, narrowed her eyes like she was searching for something. "You're her brother."

"Billy," he said. She hadn't said it like a question.

She looked him over again for a long moment before her expression cleared, eyes wider and chin set decisively. "You can call me El."

"Okay. And you can stop staring at me if you like, kid. Take a damn picture."

"Take – a picture?"

Billy snorted with impatience. "Y'know. 'Cause it'll last longer."

"Oh. I like your earring."

"I – thanks. I like your bracelet." He was surprised by her compliment, but he wasn't lying when he returned it. The bracelet was made of little creamy round shells and looped together with faded red string, the kind people sold to tourists by the ocean.

She touched it gently. "Thanks."

"El!" The nerds had finally realised the kid had arrived and come running across the grass, Wheeler junior in the lead and looking the least sulky Billy had ever seen him.

"Hi." She smiled at all of them as they took turns to hug her, Wheeler for the longest.

"You've met my brother," Max said once they'd all calmed down a bit, taken a step back to let her breathe.

"Yes."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Henderson said, and Steve reached across to knock the cap off his head.

"How come I've never met *you* before?" Billy asked, ignoring

Henderson's squawking. "I woulda thought you'd be hanging out with these losers all the time, if they dig you as much as they say they do."

"Dig?"

Who the fuck was this kid? Jesus. "Uh, they like you a whole bunch?"

"Oh. I know they do."

Everyone looked shifty as hell after that, Harrington included, shooting glances at each other like they were silently trying to decide who should speak up, before little Byers said softly, "she's home schooled. Her dad and my mom are old friends."

"Yeah," Wheeler piped up, a little sour, edging defensively closer to El, "and it's none of your business."

"Jeez, just as friendly as ever," Billy said. "Keep your hair on Wheeler, I was only asking. And I won't give her any shit, I like her. She's cooler than any of you dweebs, that's for sure." He looked up at Steve, who was watching him, half surprised, half smiling. "That includes you, Harrington."

The kids all laughed – apart from Wheeler, whose frown wavered a bit – and Henderson patted Steve on the arm in commiseration. Steve just shook his head and laughed along with the kids. El looked back to Billy, gave him a nod of approval and the smallest of smiles. "Bitchin."

After that, the kids seemed to remember the reason they'd all driven out there in the first place, and ran off to start up the game. They shouted out the rules enthusiastically to El as they went, Steve following behind and explaining that "no, that is definitely not how baseball works, Lucas," and, "no Dustin that's in golf, Jesus Christ, how the fuck are any of you shitheads passing gym?" The kids mostly ignored him anyway. But eventually they got a hold of themselves enough to play properly, encouraging and heckling each other in equal measure. Though all of them were nothing but supportive to El, and Max predictably kicked all their asses. But mostly, Billy found himself watching Steve, thoughts absently drifting back towards what

the two of them might get up to later, eyes following the width of his shoulders, lean strength of his arms, long legs and the sweet curve of his ass under the gym shorts he'd thrown on for the occasion.

Which was all well and good, until it hit Billy suddenly, the same sort of out-of-nowhere shock that came with a cat running out in front of his car, that Steve was his boyfriend. They hadn't discussed it or whatever, but he was. Billy was spending his summer hanging out with his *boyfriend* and his boyfriend's gaggle of weird nerdy children, which was fucking absurd, scary and weird. But, God help him, actually a little... nice? He almost got up and left right then, freaked out as he was, but the hurt look he'd have to see on Steve's face later, the betrayed look on Maxine's, was enough to pull him up. He'd have to try and focus on the 'nice' for now, and worry about the rest later.

"Hey handsome," Steve flopped down next to him a while later, pink faced and hair sweaty, careful inches left between them on the blanket. And Billy knew without having to ask, without even looking, how much Steve wanted to drape himself all over him. He was tactile, enjoyed every little touch. It grounded him, and the more Billy got used to it, the more it calmed him too.

"Hey baby."

"Enjoying the game?" Steve asked, grinning and still breathing a little heavy.

"Enjoying the view," Billy said, running an eye deliberately from Steve's feet all the way up along his legs, "nice shorts."

"You think?"

"Mm," Billy said, dared to lay a hand close enough to him on the blanket for his pinky finger to brush the outside of his bare thigh. I could just eat you up."

Steve blinked down at him, shifted where he sat on the scratchy blanket and made the shorts ride up a fraction higher. "I wish you could."

"Think it might put a black mark on your babysitting resume if I suck you off?"

“Uh,” Steve swallowed, hand balled up in the blanket, “I think it might, yeah.”

“Shame.”

Steve threw a handful of grass at him. "Don't be gross."

The kids interrupted them not long after, bored with the game and demanding food. Billy stayed sprawled on the blanket as Steve bitched about the kids having no fucking manners as he started to heft the food they'd brought with them from the trunk of his car. He supposed he could think of worse ways to be spending his summer after high school; worse ways than his absolutely fucking perfect boyfriend rolling his eyes at him across a picnic rug, whole pack of annoying but not really so bad kids laughing and hollering and flicking chips at each other. Crushed grass and sunshine and endless blue sky. It wasn't home, but he didn't hate it quite so much anymore.

It was slightly less peaceful though, when Billy let himself get drawn into a marshmallow eating contest by Steve, egged on by the delighted kids as they each stuffed their faces. Billy finished his bag first through sheer determination, grinned across at Steve while the kids booed and cheered in turn, even though he felt like he might've puked. Steve choked down his last one not long after, sniffing and eyes watery, and crap, Billy'd forgotten about his hay fever. *Poor baby*. Though he'd been the one to start it, the dumbass. He wanted to reach across and kiss the sickly sweet taste of marshmallow right out of Steve's mouth, suck on his lip and put his sticky fingers on his cheek. But he couldn't. So he settled for balling up the empty bag and throwing it at his head, cackling as Steve gaped and the kids fell about laughing.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is mostly just happy filler before the next chapter, let me live.

I'm not sure I put enough into this part really, but it's nearing the end and I'm impatient to get it done.

17. Don't Look Down the Barrel

Notes for the Chapter:

Boys being overdramatic, Steve having a bit of a wobbly moment, plus a healthy dose of hurt/comfort.

It was easier, once Billy had met El. Obviously they couldn't tell him her whole story; like where she'd come from or the fact she had actual superpowers, like something right out of the kids' comic books. And Steve had carefully skipped over the part she and her top secret abilities had played when he'd talked brief and halting about it to Billy before. But him knowing meant her existence was one less thing Steve had to keep to himself. Which he was pretty damn grateful for, considering how difficult he was starting to find keeping the thing he and Billy had going to himself. Not in the sense that he felt the urge to start chatting about it to anyone who'd listen, he wasn't quite that dopey over him. Yet. But it was hard not to just reach out for Billy whenever he fancied – taking his hand, pushing his hair back, a quick kiss – the kind of simple, affectionate gestures that had always come easy to Steve when he was dating a girl. It felt like second nature to him, and keeping it all locked in around everybody, the kids included, was something he found tricky. One day last week, sitting on a blanket with Billy stretched out beside him while the kids played ball, had been a kind of torture. Billy had teased him mercilessly before half dozing off in the muggy heat, sprawled out and relaxed with a barely noticeable little smile on his face, and Steve had had to hold himself back from running his fingers through Billy's hair.

An unexpected benefit of Billy knowing about the sixth member of the kids' party – aside from it creating yet another little tie between the two of them – was the fact that they didn't have to keep Hopper's cabin a secret from him anymore. Which meant that Billy could help with driving the kids to and fro when they wanted to hang there. It didn't happen often; only when Steve was around to watch them if Hopper wasn't, and they really needed to let off a little steam without worrying about people asking questions about El.

It was almost dark when they were leaving, dusk making the shadows long and what was left of the light an eerie blue, shifting indistinct between the trees. Despite Billy's continuous insistence that it was fucking lame, the two of them had spent most of the afternoon and evening in the cabin with the kids, playing referee if the brats got too rowdy over their boardgames and whatever. He'd gotten used to Billy tagging along while he watched the kids when the two of them had become sort-of friends, but he liked it even more now that they were sort-of more than that. The last few hours, they'd been sitting together on the couch, surrounded by candy wrappers and lost boardgame pieces, as close as they could without one of them straight up crawling into the other's lap. Even then, the kids probably wouldn't have seen anything suspicious about it. They'd gotten used to seeing Billy invading Steve's space; always draping an arm around his shoulder, flicking his ear or digging a finger in his ribs to make him jump. And it was... nice they could do that, around the kids at least, without getting weird looks. Or punches, if the wrong person caught sight of them. It wasn't something Steve had ever thought he'd have to be grateful for.

El was standing on the doorstep to see them off, ratty blanket around her shoulders as she waved goodbye. Steve didn't feel all that great about leaving her there with Hopper working for a few more hours, but she'd seemed calm enough, shrugged away his concerns and said she was used to it. He knew it was dumb of him to worry; the kid was better at taking care of herself than any of them. Billy was driving Will home as well as Max because they lived closest to the Byers' place, and Steve the three boys because they lived way at the other end of town. It took the brats forever to say their goodbyes, enough so that Steve had sort of zoned out leaning against the Beemer door, watching Billy in the front seat of his car, pouting as he searched his jacket for his cigarettes. But he was jolted out of his daze quickly enough when he heard El yelling, shouting that something was wrong. And before he could do much more than turn around, he heard the clicking. Shit. No. He'd hoped – and it was a futile hope, he'd known that – that the dead one he and Billy'd found was a fluke, a leftover. No such luck apparently.

"Get in," he shoved Dustin the rest of the way into the car, square between the shoulders, and slammed the door, "stay in there."

Dustin's indignant face was pressed up against the glass. "But Steve –"

"Stay the fuck in there!" he said again, moved around to pop the trunk. He looked over to the Camaro to see Billy climbing out of the front seat. "That goes for you too asshole," he yelled across the yard as he dug around in the trunk for his bat, "stay the hell inside that car, you hear me?"

"Sorry Harrington," Billy said, annoyingly calm as he strolled around to the back of his own trunk, and pulled out a rust-spotted crowbar to test the weight of it in his hand, "I didn't quite catch that."

"You absolute bastard."

"Yeah."

The kids seemed to take Billy's ignoring him as a cue to do the same, and scrambled out of their respective cars like ants, scurrying over to rummage in the yard outside the cabin for whatever weapons they could get their grubby little hands on. Traitors. "Whatever," he knew when to admit defeat. "Just stay back, you little shits. I've said it before and I'll say it again, I'm not having any of you getting hurt on my watch." Mercifully, they did as they were told, stayed behind him near the cabin. He turned to look out towards the trees, Billy coming to stand next to him. There was still no sign of them, other than the fucking horrible clicking, but he knew it was only a matter of moments. "I didn't want you to get caught up in this."

"I know baby," Billy said, knocking his shoulder gently into Steve's, following his gaze out into the woods, "but if you thought I was just gonna sit in the damn car with the kids while you take these fuckers down a peg, then you don't fuckin' know me at all."

"I'm sorry," Steve swallowed, steeling himself. "I'm sorry you've ended up fighting this with me, but I'm not sorry that I didn't want you to. You gotta understand that."

"Mm. I do," Billy said. "Just like you gotta understand I'm not gonna let you do this by yourself."

"I do." It fucking tore him up, but he did. If things were the other way around, he wouldn't have let Billy go it alone either.

"You're not alone." El nudged her way between them, glaring out into the dusk among the trees, face hardening as the demodogs began to seep in underneath the branches.

"Shit," Steve said, hand tightening on the bat. He didn't want her involved any more than he wanted any of the other kids to be, but he knew she was their best shot at coming out of it unhurt. And he knew she wouldn't appreciate him patronizing her either; she'd dealt with more shit than any of them. "Okay."

It felt like it was over in a flash. Silence of the forest heavy around them, and dead demodogs strewn across the dusty ground outside the cabin, Steve tried to slow his panicked breathing down. There'd been five of the bastards in the end. More than fucking enough. He, Billy and El had managed to take them all down and come out relatively unhurt, along with one surprise swing of a hammer from Max when one had slipped through and got too close to the kids for comfort.

The kids were all whooping and talking over each other, slapping El and Max on the back, thrilled at all the action and a win, too thrilled to really acknowledge how badly it might have ended. Steve looked at Billy. He was frowning down at one of the dead 'dogs, its head bashed to pieces by his crowbar. So now Billy really knew about El. He knew about El's powers, and he knew the terror of facing down a demodog alive. No way would he want to stick around after that. Steve could understand; he'd run from it all once himself, before he'd gotten his head out of his ass and gone back to help save the girl he loved.

"Steve?" Billy interrupted his thoughts, smear of black goop on his lovely face, and jerked his head towards the still happily chattering kids. "We should get them outta here."

Steve nodded, and stalked away from Billy without a word to hustle the kids back into the cars.

#

They'd decided to head to the Byers' place. El had radioed Hopper but he couldn't get back for another hour at least, and no one wanted to stay at

the cabin after what had just happened. The kids were all too het up to send home just yet anyway, so Steve would have to phone around once they got there to let all their parents know he'd be late getting them back. On top of that, he was starting to feel a bit shaky and weird, dark waters lapping at the edges of this thoughts, and he knew he wasn't quite up to wrangling the kids after the shock of having to fight those things again, having spent so long hoping it was all over and done with. He'd need some help. And according to Will, Mrs Byers should have been back from work by then.

Billy hadn't said anything else to him before they'd left the cabin. As they drove across town, Steve kept circling back to the sight of him; blinking, covered in goop, frowning between the dirty crowbar in his hands and the dead monster at his feet. But then he hadn't said anything to Billy either, hadn't wanted to push him towards the inevitable. He just waited, felt a storm silently rolling in again, clouds overhead and that murky water closing in and settling over his ears.

Joyce was already home when they pulled up outside, leaving Steve giddy with the relief of it, feeling frayed and pulled thin. She fussed over each of the kids, making sure they were all unhurt. Steve didn't miss the way her eye lingered on Will, looking for any sign of the Mind Flayer. Any lingering fear the kids might have felt had worn off, and they were all overexcited again, as though they hadn't been in serious fucking danger half an hour ago. Steve propped himself up against the counter and tried to keep it together. Their fearlessness was setting him on edge. Billy was in the corner, eyes darting and clearly uncomfortable, phone cradled in his hand as he talked fast and quiet to either his dad or Max's mom, to tell them they were going to be later than agreed. Jonathan was there too, having been studying in his room, and shooting Steve nervous little looks as he gave his mom a hand settling the kids down. Steve avoided his eye.

Once he knew they were all taken care of, and Joyce had promised to get a message to Hopper to let him know she had it under control, Steve took himself outside to sit on the steps of their porch to fall apart in peace. He put his hands over his ears, everything echoing under the cup of his palm, like being inside a cave. It was dark and still, sky purple brown overhead with a haze of cloud, moon veiled. He felt himself sinking.

But then Billy was there, boots heavy on the porch and a waft of cigarette smoke. "This seat taken?"

"Nope," he made himself say. "Help yourself."

Billy did, settled down right next to him on the step with a grunt and a sigh. Steve wondered then, belatedly and with a touch of guilt, whether he'd been hurt in the fight. It also occurred to him that Billy probably hadn't been to the Byers' house since last November.

"You holdin' up okay, pretty boy?"

"Been better."

Billy snorted. "That sure was something, huh?"

"Yeah. That's uh," Steve faltered, swallowed thickly. "I guess you understand why I freaked out when we saw that dead one in the woods now?"

"Reckon so."

He let Steve be for several long minutes after that, and he couldn't shake the feeling that Billy couldn't bear to touch him, was purposely keeping the distance between them in readiness to pull away altogether, and permanently. It was fine. Steve had been waiting for it ever since they'd finished with the demodogs, had half expected Billy to yell and scream and stomp off as soon as the kids were safe. And he wouldn't have blamed him for it either. Billy was playing it... gentler than Steve had been expecting, but that did little to banish the misery he could feel settling in already. No way would he want to stick around after seeing the type of shit Steve dealt with first hand. He didn't need that kind of baggage with all the crap his dad already handed out to him. He'd have no safe place at all now, thanks to Steve.

"You want to get going?"

"...What?" That hadn't been what Steve was expecting him to say.

"The kids are safe now, and you look like shit, Harrington. Figured you might want to get away. I'll stay with you if you want, after I've taken Max – "

"Look, Billy can you just cut the crap?" Steve couldn't bear it any longer. "I know you – you can't want to be here." With me.

“What?” He felt Billy shift to look at him.

“Don’t play with me Hargrove,” he said. “I thought we were at the point where you’d spare me that kinda crap, at least.”

“Steve,” Billy started, anger starting to curl up his voice now, hurt and confused. “I – “

“If you’re going to break things off, can we just do it now so I’ve got time to pretend to be okay when I go back in there?”

Billy’d gone still. “Wait... you think I’m gunna ditch you?”

“After all this?” Steve said, laughed sadly, not able to look away from his own goop-spattered shoes. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Shit, Steve,” Billy said gruffly, rough edge of irritation in his voice. “First off, I already fucking knew about those things, because you told me, dipshit. I saw that dead one in the woods, it wasn’t like it out of the fuckin’ blue. And I won’t lie baby, dealing with them alive was a lot to take in, but I already knew.”

“I... guess.”

“Second, believe it or fuckin’ not, dumbass, I’ve gotten sorta attached to you,” Billy continued, Steve hardly daring to move. “And third... well, pounding those monsters in the face was kinda fun.”

“Oh.” Steve didn’t know what else to say, cracked and brittle as he felt, held together at the very last moment by what Billy had said. He thought he might cry. But his eyes stayed dry, and the feeling of brackish, silty water pressing in around his head and in his ears receded. Still searching for the words, he leant across to headbutt Billy’s shoulder. But once he’d

made contact, the solidness of him, the hot-metal, leather and smoke smell of his jacket, he couldn't bring himself to pull away again, and ended up just resting his head there.

"Yeah 'oh,' asshole," Steve felt the grumpy rumble of Billy's voice. "Can I touch you now?"

"Hm?"

"I uh," Billy hesitated, like he did sometimes if he felt like he was about to give Steve a little bit more of himself than he was comfortable with. "I wasn't sure if you'd freak out, if you needed space or whatever," he finished gruffly.

Steve breathed in the smoke-hairspray-earth smell of the collar of Billy's shirt, stretched blindly to kiss what turned out to be his chin, dry lips on a day's worth of stubble. "Yeah. Please."

Billy's arms were around him in an instant, Steve pretty much crawling as far into his lap as he could, eyes scrunched shut against the faint glow of the porch light, feeling his way. "I got you, sweetheart."

"Dickhead," Steve said into Billy's neck. He sort of meant, I love you.

"I know."

Billy's hand wormed between them both to find Steve's, linking their fingers together tight. His palm was rough and warm, real and human and grounding, and just about everything Steve needed, after the Upside Down had reared its ugly head and messed him up all over again. Billy dotted little kisses along Steve's hairline. The evening had turned chillier, but they were warm where they touched. He could hear the kids inside the house, still laughing and chattering and full of it after the fight. Ten minutes ago packed into the kitchen with them all, he'd found it too much, stifling, grating. But it was a kind of comfort now, muffled and warming and

familiar.

“So,” Billy said, voice loud in the quiet little bubble Steve had thought them into, “El’s kinda special, huh?”

“Yeah. Sorry I – “ Steve tried to get his thoughts back together enough to explain, “it wasn’t up to me to tell you.”

“Yeah yeah, I know that,” Billy’s arm tightened slightly. “S’okay. She’s pretty cool.”

“I can’t believe she warmed up to you so quick,” Steve said, unexpected smile pulling up the corner of his mouth as he leaned a little more of his weight into Billy. “Took her months to even talk to me.”

“The kid’s got good taste,” Billy said, pulled back far enough so he could ruffle up Steve’s hair.

“Asshole,” he hissed and batted Billy away, suddenly and vividly aware of why it pissed Dustin off so much when he did that to him. “Get off, man.”

“Whatever. You ready to go back inside?”

“I think so,” he meant it too, surprisingly. “Thanks.”

“What for?”

“Everything?” Steve shrugged. “Being here? Just... thanks.”

Billy smiled, Steve finally brave enough to look at him again to see it. “You’re welcome, baby.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Italics don't want to play ball right now, I'll put them in later.

18. Weirdness Seems to Know Me Even Better than I Even Know Myself

Notes for the Chapter:

Carries straight on from the last part.

AO3 did the thing where it directs you to a blank page instead of posting, so I had to re-edit. Hopefully I didn't miss too much.

"Whatever," Billy sniffed, looked away from the cute, ruffled mess he'd made of Steve's hair. "You ready to go back inside?"

"I think so," Steve said. Then a moment later, "thanks."

"What for?" Billy winced as he stood, shoulders cracking as he stretched them out. Swinging a crowbar at those bastards was a little different to lifting weights.

"Everything?" Steve shrugged, though he looked a little less hopeless than he had when Billy'd joined him on the porch. "Being here? Just... thanks."

Billy had to chew on his lip to keep back a smile, still coming to terms with himself being so fucking sappy. But at least Steve was finally soothed enough to look him in the eye again. "You're welcome, baby."

"Mm," Steve waved a hand at him. "Help me up?"

"Sure thing, gorgeous," Billy wrapped a hand around Steve's wrist to pull him up, let Steve kiss the tip of his nose. He glared at him for it, though the only punishment he got for it was another kiss. "I'm fucking *starving*, Jesus. D'you get this hungry after you fight monsters?"

"No, actually," Steve said, rubbing at his nose. "It uh, hits me like a train the next day though."

"I could eat a damn horse."

“Not sure I can help you there, man,” Steve moved to wrap his arms around Billy’s middle, almost lifting him off the ground with how tight he was holding on, “but I’m sure Mrs Byers can find you somethin’.”

“Are you trying to squeeze the fucking life outta me Harrington? Jesus,” he huffed. Steve laughed into his neck, soft and damp, eased his hold on him just a fraction.

“Sorry baby,” Steve said, and kissed him.

Honestly, the porch steps of the Byers’ creepy-ass house was the last place on earth Billy ever thought he’d be kissing anybody, let alone a boy, and never anyone as... good as Steve. Like he could sense Billy was wobbling, Steve kept on holding him, reassuring. Light, sweet presses of his lips to Billy’s, dry kisses across his chin and cheeks. Billy stroked the back of Steve’s neck, something for him to hold on to as well as keeping Steve on the ground. The other hand inevitably snuck down to palm at his ass a little - Steve seemed happier, perked up a bit, and Billy wasn’t above taking the chance to cop a feel. Steve only laughed into his next kiss, squeezed Billy a bit tighter again. Then the front door opened, warm orange light from the living room spilling out across the porch, perfectly illuminating the fact that they were necking, and that Billy had a decent handful of Steve’s ass.

“...Oh.”

Billy closed his eyes and let out a long sigh of annoyance at not being able to ever catch a fucking break, eased back from Steve just enough to scowl at the figure in the doorway. “Can we help you, Byers?”

He heard Steve snort gently into his neck before turning to smile sheepishly. “Hey Jonathan.”

“Uh. Hey, Steve.” Byers just stared at them in silence for another long moment, long enough that Billy began to feel prickly and irritated, like he was being watched, weighed up, judged.

“There something we can do for you Byers,” he said loudly, not bothering to keep just how pissed he was over being gaped at like some freak out of his voice, “or are you just gonna fuckin’ stare?” He

felt Steve's grip on his waist tighten ever so slightly.

"Um, yeah," Byers eventually managed to get out, blinking himself out of his daze. "They sent me to come see if you guys were okay."

"Well, as you can see, we're just fucking fine thank you," Billy spat. "Or were, until you interrupted."

"It's okay, " Steve poked him in the side, breath warm on his cheek, "no harm done, right?"

Billy kept on looking at where Byers was still hovering awkwardly by the door, annoyance at having been found out growing, bubbling into anger, and a horrible, shattered-glass feeling of fear that *everyone would know*. "No," Billy said, lip curling back and shoulders going up, snarling at Byers where he stood, "none at all. As long as Byers here doesn't get it into his head to go yapping about shit that isn't his business."

"Cool it big guy," Steve untangled his arms from where they still sat around Billy's middle, slid a hand down to clasp their fingers together. "He's not going to fucking tell anyone, Jesus."

"Yeah?" Billy said, well aware he was squaring up, making more of a *thing* out of it than anyone else would think rational, but he was scared, okay? And when he got scared, he got angry, fucking sue him for it. It was something he'd lived in fear of other people knowing about him for years, and the thought of it getting back to his dad was enough to push everything else out of his head, good sense included. And he'd never been one for good manners to begin with. "How can you possibly know that?"

"Look man, I won't- "

"Because he's not a jerk," Steve cut Jonathan off, "because he's my friend. And he has no reason to. Who exactly would it benefit if he did, huh?"

"I've been a dick to the lot of you," Billy said. "If it was me, I'd jump at the fuckin' chance for some kinda revenge."

"Yeah, well we're not all you, baby," Steve said and pressed a kiss to

his cheek, ignoring Billy's hiss and Byers' surprised cough. And then, like he could hear Billy's panicked thoughts still clambering all over each other like a box of baby rabbits - "I promise you Hargrove, it won't leave this house."

#

The kids had all ended up staying the night, Mrs Byers having taken pity on Steve and rung around to check with everyone's parents that it was okay, reassure them it was no bother. Which had gotten Billy worked up all over again, when she'd called up the Hargrove household. He'd had a hard enough time telling his dad he and Maxine were going to be a little late, never mind out all night in the house of someone he'd never met before. But after Mrs Byers had assured Neil that Max and El would be rooming together while the boys slept in the front room – and dropped the chief's name in once or twice for good measure – he must have agreed. She hadn't mentioned Billy, at his request, and Neil hadn't asked after him either. That was just fine by Billy.

Less than an hour later, and the kids were all asleep, finally. All full bellies and worn out from the excitement, piled up like fuckin' puppies.

"Henderson always snore like that?" Billy said, partly to Steve, and partly to the scrubbed surface of the Byers' kitchen table. He dug his thumbnail into an old cigarette burn on the wood.

"Yeah. I stayed over once while his mom was out of town for a funeral," Steve said. "Worst night's sleep I've ever had. Which I guess is saying a lot, if you count nights like this one."

They were sitting at the kitchen table together, Billy with his pendant between his teeth, Steve playing with Billy's hand, drawing circles on his palm. The pair of them were overtired, too sleepy to move to go to bed, Billy slumped against Steve while Steve ran his other hand through Billy's hair, scratching gently at his scalp. He was going to melt away to nothing if Steve kept it up.

"Right boys, I'm going to – oh." Mrs Byers came to a halt on the threshold, mouth open and hands hovering by her sides. Her

expression of surprise was disturbingly similar to her eldest son's. But she recovered quickly enough, lips pressed together to hide a smile and eyes bright. "I just wanted to say I'm going to bed."

"Oh. Uh, 'night, Mrs Byers," Steve said, while Billy scowled at the ugly kitchen flooring. Fucking brilliant.

"Goodnight, boys." Still practically twinkling with delight, she disappeared down the hall, leaving Steve hiding a smile in his hand and Billy wishing, for about the eighth time that night, that everyone would just disappear.

"You okay, baby?" Steve said eventually.

"Yes." Even to his own ears, Billy sounded sulky. Good. He was.

"You sure?"

"No, *I'm not*. I mean, Jesus fuckin' Christ, let's go wake up the kid and tell him too, then the whole goddamn Byers family'll know we're boning."

"You saying we're just boning, baby?"

"Nah sweetheart," Billy said, not bothering to lower his voice, "I mean, sucking your dick's pretty great too –"

"Shh," Steve quickly tried to smother a laugh, smacking Billy on the arm as best he could at the awkward angle, "you'll wake up the kids."

"I don't care."

"Billy?"

"What, Harrington?"

"Are you... does it really bother you?" he said quietly, in his soft 'serious conversation' voice, eyes gone all big and sincere. "People knowing?"

"Yeah," he said honestly. "It fucking does, Harrington. If it ever gets back to my dad..." he faltered. "I honestly don't know what he'd do."

And yes, of course that scares the shit out of me. And about the others... I've never liked other people knowing my business – “

“Yeah no shit,” Steve said.

“Shut up. But if you can promise me they won't go fuckin' blabbing – “

“They won't.”

“Harrington,” he said, patience run out and not sure what else to say to make him understand, “how can you – “

“They won't.”

“Fine,” he gave in for the moment. “That aside, yeah it does bother me. But...” he let out a long breath, hoped that what he was about to admit didn't somehow fuck everything up. “Maybe a couple people knowing isn't as fucking terrible as I always thought it would be. Happy now?”

"More than ever," Steve pulled Billy gently back against his side, started fiddling about with his hair again.

"Fuckin' sap," Billy grumbled, but let him do it.

Of course he was scared. Scared of his dad finding out, scared of what people would say behind his back, scared of fucking things up and sending Steve running. Because he broke things. But somehow, for once, things appeared to be going the other way; Steve had said once or twice that it was Billy holding him *together*. And what with Billy's stormclouds and Steve's dark waters, there was no way they wouldn't trip up a few times; he wasn't fucking stupid enough to expect anything less. But now wasn't the time for him to get all bent out of shape over that - Steve had already spooked himself by convincing himself that Billy was going to leave him all of thirty minutes ago. And it was easy to pretend it didn't matter, in the quiet glow of the kitchen, Steve's fingers caught soft in his hair. Scared or not, it was worth it, to Billy, for moments like that one. And too fucking late; he was far too gone for Steve to break things off on purpose. He loved the dipshit, and there was no changing that.

Notes for the Chapter:

This isn't necessarily how I would imagine Billy reacting to being outed in every situation, but that's what's happening this time around. Also I'm trying to wrap this up, I didn't want a whole other crisis to for them to sort out. I kept writing myself in circles over it lol. One more part to finish things off :)

19. Looking to the Clock Beside my Bed

Notes for the Chapter:

Like the first chapter, this is partly made up of a drabble I posted before. Short and horribly smushy. I've said it before and I'll say it again, I'm weak for soft boys.

The heat of high summer had sloped further into sticky humidity, meaning that most mornings, Steve would wake up in twisted sheets, sweat-damp and groggy. It wasn't helped by the fact that both of them had a tendency to be clingy while they slept. That morning for instance, Steve had woken with his chest stuck to Billy's bare back, and arm numb from where it was squashed underneath him. By now, he was used to waking up next to Billy. Used to the way he grunted and buried himself in close just as he was falling asleep, the way he'd cling on tighter if Steve was shifting about in his dreams, the way he'd sometimes wake up to a sunny morning and Billy grinning as he pressed a row of smug little kisses down his neck. He'd never liked being alone. But it wasn't just having someone there, sleeping next to him, that helped keep him afloat. It was having *Billy*.

Most mornings, he was still awake early. The main difference being that he felt a lot less compelled to get out of bed in such a hurry these days, since Billy was still in it. He used to drag himself out of bed as soon as he could, to escape the feeling of lying there alone. Not that it ever did him much good, considering the rest of the house was often just as empty. But now, it made no sense to rush out of bed every morning, when the only company he wanted was still between the sheets. Deeming it late enough that Billy wouldn't chew him out for it, Steve stretched over to wake him up with a kiss. But before he could do so, he felt the familiar creeping, heavy tickling in the back of his nose, and pulled back quickly so he wouldn't sneeze directly onto the back of Billy's head. Fucking allergies.

"Take your medicine, dipshit," Billy said into the pillow he was clutching.

"Yeah, thanks baby," Steve sniffed, rubbed at his watery eyes, "I'd

never have thought of that.”

“Shut the hell up,” still drowsy, Billy twisted around to glare at him, hair a total mess, “and take your damn medicine before it gets too bad.

“Since when were you such an expert?” Steve said, but started digging around in his nightstand for it all the same, nose tickling again already.

“Since that time you fucking sneezed with my dick in your mouth and almost fucking bit it clean off,” Billy said dryly. “Not sexy, Harrington.”

“That’s fair.” Not one of his finest moments, but he guessed that was what he got for attempting a blow job in a damn hayfield in the middle of summer when you had vicious fucking allergies. “You want breakfast? My parents should be back before lunch, so we’d better get goin’ if you want to have time to clean up too.”

“Why?” he said, smirking. “You offering to make a mess of me first, sweetheart?”

“Maybe,” Steve said, ducking to kiss the top of his head, because he knew how much Billy love-hated it, “I meant the kitchen though.” They’d left it in a total mess after making dinner the night before, putting the dishes aside in favour of ignoring a movie while they made out on the couch and taking a shower.

“You really know how to rev me up, Harrington, you know that?”

“Mm,” Steve said. “Just for that, you don’t get a kiss good morning.”

“Who said I wanted one?”

“Fine,” Steve said, shot him one last happy smile before climbing out of bed, darting off downstairs to get some coffee on. He knew Billy would follow.

#

Quiet mornings with Steve were different from those in the Hargrove

household. Billy still woke up early, the habit too well worn in to break, but he didn't get up right away. Instead, he'd settle closer into the warm weight of Steve pressed up behind him, breath hot and slow on the back of his neck. Steve would often wake first anyway, if he'd had a bad night, and his huffing and shifting about or the tightening of his arm around Billy would wake him too. Then Billy would roll over to kiss his neck, chin, nose, lips, the freckle on his cheek, whatever he could reach, and they'd lay there a while longer.

Occasionally, he'd wake to find an empty space beside him, cold and rumpled where Steve should have been. If that was the case, Billy would get up too, hating the thought of him waiting alone downstairs. He'd go down too to search him out, usually finding him standing out back by the pool, holding a cigarette or cup of coffee, something to occupy his hands. Billy would slip his arms around him, kiss his shoulder, steal the smoke or coffee and make a show of it, to try and pull Steve back from the shadowy place he was trying not to slip back into. They would stand there together, tops of the trees yellow with morning sun, birds chirping and all that shit, houses far enough apart they couldn't hear the neighbours, and watch the morning begin. The clouds didn't sit quite so heavy above his head anymore. Billy was used to quiet mornings, and he wouldn't trade them for the world.

Notes for the Chapter:

Aaaand that's it. Ta for sticking with me, and thanks to anyone who commented/left kudos <3